



2017

Torah from the Years of Wrath 1939-1943: The Historical Context of the Aish Kodesh

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Torah from the Years of Wrath
1939-1943

Torah from the Years of Wrath 1939-1943

The Historical Context of the *Aish Kodesh*



Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira ר"ק שפירא
The Rebbe of Piaseczno, also known as the Aish Kodesh (Holy Fire)
Son of Rabbi Elimelekh of Grodzisk
Son-in-law of Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe of Kozienice

Henry Abramson

2017

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Cover design by Meir Weiss and Tehilah Weiss

Dedicated to the Piaseczno Rebbe
and his students

איך וויל זע גאר ניסט.
איך וויל ניט דיין ג'ע,
איך וויל ניט דיין עוה"ב כו'.
איך וויל מער ניט אז דיך אליין.

I want nothing at all.
I do not want Your Garden of Eden,
I do not want Your World to Come.
All I want is You alone.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi
(1745-1812)

This publication was made possible
by a grant in memory of

Ellen Broida Joseph and Professor Daniel D. Joseph

עלא אסתר בת הרב אברהם שמואל ע"ה

דוד יצחק בן שמואל ע"ה

Ellen was a woman of extraordinary love, generosity and wisdom, whose spirit, sage counsel and full-hearted support transformed many lives.

Daniel, a Professor at the University of Minnesota, taught fluid dynamics to generations of students. A man of great warmth, he looked by nature beyond the boundaries of the obvious to find the deeper mystery within.

Their legacy lives on.

In loving memory from their children and grandchildren.

This publication was made possible
by a grant from

Mark and Livia Rottenberg

in memory of their relatives
those known and those unknown
who were murdered by the Nazis ימך שמם

May their memory be a blessing

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RABBI MOSHE WEINBERGER



קהילת אש קודש דוודמיר

הרב משה וויינבערגער
פרא דאטורא

ב"ה / אדר ג' תש"ס

The remarkable sefer Aish Kodesh of the holy Rebbe of Piaseczna has not left my desk for the past forty years. I have always felt that the Rebbe had miraculously en clothed the inexpressible pain of my parents and their fellow survivors in his derashos from the years of wrath. Still, as much as I studied and taught the sefer, I struggled in vain to understand the specific context of the Rebbe's experiences that ultimately found a voice in the Torah of that particular Shabbos or Yom Tov. Because of this I always felt that I couldn't fully appreciate the unique significance of what the Rebbe was seeking to convey to his devastated "congregation" in the Warsaw Ghetto.

I am indebted to Professor Henry (Hillel) Abramson for his extraordinary study of Aish Kodesh, and his bringing to life the heart-wrenching, poetic world of the great tzaddik and martyr, Rebbe Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira of Piaseczna. May this work be a merit for him and his family and may we all be privileged to be uplifted by the teachings of one of our most inspired masters.

דבר אש קודש דוודמיר
לרב משה וויינבערגער
לרב משה וויינבערגער

כח באלול תשע"ז

September 19, 2017

Dear Dr. Henry Abramson
Dean, Lander College of Arts and Sciences
Touro College
1602 Avenue J
Brooklyn NY 11230

The last two decades have been blessed with research on the Rebbe of Piaseczno. However, there was a great lacuna. The historical background behind each sermon and homily, and how it affects the understanding of the sermon, has not been studied and presented to the reader. For the first time Dr. Henry Abramson studied every sermon in light of the historical, tragic events and filled this lacuna. This is a groundbreaking study, a great achievement and a major contribution to the Rebbe's teachings.

Sincerely,

Daniel Reiser

Rabbi Dr. Daniel Reiser
Chair, Department of Jewish Thought
Herzog Academic College
Alon Shvut and Jerusalem

RABBI MOSHE TEITELBAUM

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8 Spruce Street

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"Remember not the earlier events nor contemplate historical precedent." [Isaiah 43: 18]

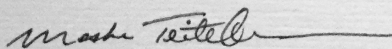
Our Rabbis teach us that the prophet Yeshayahu forewarned that Israel's most recent tribulations will overshadow their earlier ones. The destruction of European Jewry in the years 1939-1945 proved to be chilling fulfillment of that portent.

Trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto, a giant of the spirit, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (Rebbe of Piaseczno) struggled to determine the correct theological and religious/historical context in which to categorize the suffering that European Jewry had begun to endure. As reflected in "Aish Kodesh", over the course of more than three years of privation and excruciating spiritual torment, the Rebbe attempted to grasp the inexplicable, to comprehend the incomprehensible.

In the depths of his refined, holy soul, Rabbi Shapira found both the courage and the faith needed to remain steadfast and unwavering in his service of the Almighty, even while conceding that the increasingly inscrutable ways of God remain forever a mystery.

Dr. Henry Abramson's important and masterful work carefully traces and illuminates the evolving response of the Rebbe of Piaseczno to the unprecedented atrocities suffered by the Jewish people as the world they once knew was being destroyed.

Moshe Teitelbaum



Rabbi, Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst

שאל אביך ויגדך, זקניך ויאמרו לך

Ask your father and he will tell you, your grandfather and he will explain to you

Devarim 32:7

Moshe taught that key to understanding the present is the life experiences of parents and grandparents. "Ask your father and he will tell you..." His words were directed to the first generation that did not experience Sinai firsthand, those who had to rely on the tradition of their predecessors.

For most of the winding trail of Jewish history, this has been the model – until a century ago. The destruction of the Holocaust created also a deep fracture in that chain of experience passed from grandparents to parents to children. We, the surviving generations, cannot ask our ancestors about their perspective and outlook on those dark times. What did they think? How did they cope? How did they bear the suffering? So many of these questions remain unanswered.

One of the remarkable exceptions to this silence has been Aish Kodesh, written during the terrible years of wrath. Even though it has been published numerous times and studied by many, Dr. Abramson opened the door for us to appreciate this holy work in the context in which it was written—inside horrific circumstances of the Warsaw Ghetto and its daily tragedies. Through his careful and honest research, he has given us a glimpse into the world of R. Shapira and how he responded to the acute suffering he experienced, personally and communally. Dr. Abramson pored over the manuscript, not dismissing as much as a simple line or strikethrough. Dr. Abramson—a close personal friend—has allowed us to reach into the dark clouds of the Holocaust itself, and ask our "grandfather so he can explain to us."

May Dr. Abramson's hard work reach the hearts and minds of those who truly care.

With Torah blessings.

זקני בני ישראל

Rabbi Ya'akov Trump

Associate Rabbi, Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst

Introduction

In December 1950, a Polish construction worker clearing rubble from the ruined Warsaw Ghetto unearthed a tin milk container containing a trove of Hebrew and Yiddish-language manuscripts. The papers proved to be one of the three caches buried in the last months of the war by Oneg Shabbat, the secret society of amateur historians working under the direction of Dr. Emmanuel Ringelblum, dedicated to the task of documenting the life and death of Warsaw Jewry under the Nazi occupation. Included among the documents were the wartime writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, a noted Hasidic leader. His Saturday afternoon sermons, delivered between September 1939 and July 1942 and with annotations through January 1943, were published in 1960 under the Hebrew title *Aish Kodesh*: Holy Fire.¹

The sermons, which the author called *Torah from the Years of Wrath*, are virtually unparalleled as a source for the spiritual life of religious Jews during the Holocaust. Taken together, they constitute perhaps the most sustained discussion of theodicy since the biblical Book of Job. Pious Hasidim and secular academics alike have studied these writings for Rabbi Shapira's profound theological insights.

The sermons seem inscrutably disconnected from history. Nowhere in the book do the terms "Nazi" or "German" appear, and indeed if it were not for a few scattered annotations, it would be possible to read the entire work without realizing that it was anything other than an unusually dark work of Hasidic thought from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Scholars therefore

¹ Alternatively transliterated *Esh Kodesh*.

tended to dismiss the possibility of mining his writings for historical information. The prevailing wisdom among students of Rabbi Shapira's wartime writings argued that the principal value of the Rebbe's thought was accessible to anyone possessing a cursory familiarity with the history of Warsaw Jewry during the Holocaust.

The following chapters will demonstrate precisely the opposite: a full appreciation of the Rebbe's wartime work is *only* possible with a thorough grounding in the specific events in the daily life in the Ghetto. This is because the sermons should be understood as *public* documents, shared widely in real time, and not as solitary meditations written in private and stored away in a desk drawer. Week after week the followers of the Rebbe gathered to hear his wisdom, the wisdom of the Torah and Hasidism, to help them understand the traumatic experiences they shared since the previous Sabbath. The veil cast over the Rebbe's words was a literary and theological device, opaque to post-war readers but easily penetrated by his audience. Each and every sermon was nothing less than a Hasidic response to the micro-history of the Ghetto, placing the quotidian events in the cosmic meta-history of the the weekly Torah reading.

Reading the sermons in the light of historical data reveals the hidden meaning of the Rebbe's words. It also exposes a spiritual and intellectual heroism of incredible proportions. Refusing offers to escape the Ghetto, the Rebbe insisted on remaining with his Hasidim to the bitter end, enduring tragedies both communal and personal. He drew deeply from his immense reservoirs of faith and Torah learning to provide *hizuk*, encouragement, to his fellow Jews, right up to his own martyrdom in November 1943. This book illustrates the Rebbe's method of conveying hope and

meaning to Jews suffering in the hellish environment of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Chapter One will provide a biographical introduction to Rabbi Shapira, placing him in his religious, literary, and cultural environment. Chapters Two, Three and Four will look at the Hebrew years 5700, 5701 and 5702 respectively, covering the secular dates September 1939 through July 1942, when the great deportation of Warsaw's Jewish population to Treblinka took place. Chapter Five will discuss the Rebbe's final textual annotations, his last days in a labor camp, and the spiritual legacy he left for his followers.

As part of his literary will, Rabbi Shapira requested that any publication of his works include a memorial to his family members, including his wife Hanah Berakhah who passed away in 1937.² He also asked that the names of his father and father-in-law should appear on the title page. Not included in the memorial was the name of his only daughter Rekhil Yehudis, whose fate was unknown when the Rebbe composed the document. Instead, in a cover letter he expressed his heartfelt prayer for the safety of his "precious daughter, the gentle and modest Rekhil Yehudis."³ She was last seen in Warsaw on the second day of Rosh Hodesh Elul, 5702 (August 14, 1942), when the Nazis deported her along with 6,000 other Jews to Treblinka.

² Daniel Reiser, ed., *Rabi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira: Derashot mi-shenot ha-za'am* Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College/World Union of Jewish Studies/Yad Vashem, 2017 I: 328-329. Reiser's two-volume critical edition of the Rebbe's writings will be cited henceforth as *Derashot*.

³ *Derashot* 1:328.

The following memorial represents the last written testimony to the centuries of Hasidic civilization that once flourished in Poland.⁴

In Eternal Memory

of my holy, righteous and honored mother and teacher, the woman of valor Hanah Berakhah of noble lineage, daughter of the holy and righteous Rabbi Hayim Shmuel ha-Levi of Hantshin. She served God with all her might, heart and soul, and with great effort raised her children to Torah. Her holy and pure soul rose on high on the Sabbath eve of the 7th of Marheshvan 5700 [October 20 1939].

My honored wife, the righteous, modest, pious woman of noble lineage Rahel Hayah Miriam, the daughter of the righteous and holy Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe, Head of the court of Kozienice. She had an exceptionally fine character and even learned Torah every day. She was like a merciful mother to every embittered soul, and especially to Torah students and Hasidim. In the bloom of youth her holy and pure soul rose on high, on the holy Sabbath of the week *and Miriam died there*,⁵ the tenth of Tammuz, 5697 [June 19, 1937].

My honored only son, cherished heart and soul, the holy and pious Rabbi of noble lineage

⁴ Mendel Piekarz (Paikazh), *Ha-teudah he-hasidit ha-sifrutit ha-aharonah al admat Polin: Divrei ha-Rebi be-gito Varsha* Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977.

⁵ Numbers 20:1.

Elimelekh Ben Tsion. A man of truth, of fine and good character, steeped in Torah, wise, a lover of Israel, who left behind Torah insights on tractate Shabbat and the first volume of Yoreh Deah. Gravely wounded at a *time of suffering for Yaakov*,⁶ on Monday the 12th of Tishrei 5700, after great and bitter suffering his holy and pure soul rose on high on the 16th, the second day of Sukkot [September 29, 1939].

His honored wife, my daughter-in-law, the holy, pure and modest woman of noble lineage Gitl, daughter of the righteous Rabbi Shlomo Hayim of Balakhov. With great personal sacrifice she remained by the hospital where her husband, my holy son, lay wounded, and she was killed on Tuesday the 13th of Tishrei [September 26, 1939].

May the Merciful One shelter them forever and bind their souls in the bonds of life. God is their inheritance, and may they rest in peace, amen.⁷

⁶ Cf. Jeremiah 30:7.

⁷ Reproduced in *Sefer Aish Kodesh* Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piasetsnah/Feldheim, 2007, unnumbered page xi; *Derashot* 1:329.

Chapter One

Discovery



Milk can buried under 68 Nowolipki Street, Warsaw

Clearing the rubble of the destroyed Warsaw Ghetto in December 1950, a Polish construction worker discovered two metal milk cans sunk into the foundation of 68 Nowolipki street, a building that once housed a Jewish school. He broke the makeshift seals and discovered a literary and historical treasure: a massive collection of Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish writings, one of the lost caches of a secret archive that documented the agony of Warsaw Jewry during the years of Nazi occupation.

The documents were assiduously compiled by a diverse group of amateur historians, demographers and sociologists working under the direction of the martyred historian Emanuel Ringelblum. Trapped in the Ghetto, Ringelblum realized early in the war that the complex, multifaceted story of Warsaw Jewry's response to the



Emmanuel
Ringelblum
1900-1944

horrific Nazi onslaught was historically significant and deserved thorough documentation. Working feverishly and with virtually no material resources, he recruited a cadre of dedicated *zamlers* ("collectors") and gave them the task of penetrating, analyzing, and above all documenting every aspect of ghetto life: the bizarre economy with its dependence on children smuggling food from outside the walls, the political factions and the resistance, the Jewish Council (*Judenrat*) administration and its hated Jewish Police force, cultural institutions, and religious activity. For the *zamlers*, the secret archive represented a type of resistance to the Nazis through scholarship. What the Germans sought to obliterate, the *zamlers* sought to preserve forever. The clandestine group operated under the code name *Oneg Shabbat* ("the joy of the Sabbath").¹

After the summer of 1942, when the deportations to the Treblinka death camp reduced the remaining Jewish population of Warsaw to a fraction of its wartime height of half a million, Ringelblum determined—correctly—that the Ghetto would be completely razed. He directed his *zamlers* to cease collecting new documents, and prepare all the materials for burial in three secret locations. Many of the *zamlers* included their final wills, expecting they would not survive the war.

¹ Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.

Charged with the task of documenting religious life in the Ghetto was Rabbi Shimon Huberband, a Torah scholar who devoted his final years to the secret archive. Huberband was considered Ringelblum's closest collaborator. Huberband's first wife and child were killed in the initial German bombing raids, and he sought solace by immersing himself in his historical research, documenting the religious life of Warsaw Jewry. He deposited a remarkable manuscript in the *Oneg Shabbat* archive that was eventually published under the title *Kiddush Hashem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life during the Holocaust* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1987). The book appeared posthumously, for he and his second wife were deported to the Treblinka Death Camp on August 18, 1942 and murdered shortly thereafter.

Rabbi Huberband had regularly attended the underground Sabbath services led by a charismatic Hasidic leader, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, and described several of these clandestine meetings in his own work. Rabbi Huberband had familial connections with Rabbi Shapira,

Arbeitsamt: ARBEITSAMT WARSCHAU
NEBENSTELLE FÜR DEN
JÜD. WOHNBEZIRK

Nebenstelle:

Meldekarte für Juden ✓
Nr. 21321

Der Jude Huberband Szymon
Die Jüdin
geboren am: 19.IV.1909
in Chełm, Kr. Kielce, poln. verh.
Wohnort: Warschau
Zamenhofe Str. Nr.: 19/19
Berufsgruppe u. Art: 25 = 1

ist auf Grund der Zweiten Durchführungsvorschrift zur Verordnung vom 26. Oktober 1939 über die Einführung des Arbeitszwanges für die jüdische Bevölkerung des Generalgouvernements vom 12. Dezember 1939 erfasst und steht dem Arbeitsamt zur Arbeitseinsatz zur Verfügung. Ein Auflagen auf der Strasse ist nicht statthaft.

(Stempel des Arbeitsamts)

(Unterschrift)

Kontrollmeldung am

(eder Woche, soweit kein Arbeitsverhältnis besteht.)

Staatsdruckerei Warschau — Nr. 479-41.

Warsaw Ghetto registration card of Rabbi Shimon Huberband, 1909-1942

and even edited a student publication published by Rabbi Shapira's school.² It is likely that Rabbi Huberband introduced Rabbi Shapira to the research of the *Oneg Shabbat* society. Several months after the great deportation of August 1942 that took Rabbi Huberband's life, Rabbi Shapira conveyed his manuscripts to the archive, probably through the agency of a Ghetto resident named Menachem Mendel Kon.³ Ringelblum included the Rebbe's precious manuscripts in the milk cans for burial.

The manuscripts—both the Rebbe's writings and two-thirds of the *Oneg Shabbat* archive—would survive the war. Their authors would not. Emmanuel Ringelblum escaped the Ghetto in March of 1943, but heroically returned a month later to participate in the great uprising. He was captured and sent to the Trawniki labor camp, rescued in a daring operation conducted by the resistance, then disappeared into an underground bunker with thirty other Jews for nearly a year until the secret location was betrayed to the Nazis. He, his wife and child, along with all the Jews hiding there, were killed on March 7, 1944.

Rabbi Shapira remained in the Ghetto for several months after the 1942 deportations, working in a forced-labor shoe factory for several months until he, too, was deported to Trawniki. The cycle of Jewish revolts that began with the

² Daniel Reiser, ed., *Rabi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira: Derashot mi-shenot ha-za'am* Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College/World Union of Jewish Studies/Yad Vashem, 2017 I: 30. Reiser's two-volume critical edition of the Rebbe's writings will be cited henceforth as *Derashot*.

³ Kon was a close friend of Huberband, and wrote a moving obituary for the amateur historian. See *To Live With Honor and Die With Honor!...Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives "O.S." ["Oneg Shabbath"]*, ed. Joseph Kermish, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986, 54-57. It is also likely that the Rebbe was personally acquainted to some degree with Emmanuel Ringelblum, judging from a passing comment in Hillel Seidman, *Tog-bukh fun Varshever Geto*, Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1947, p. 102.

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943 culminated in similar insurrections at Treblinka (August) and Sobibor (October), moving the Nazis to initiate “Operation Harvest Festival,” the plan to murder the last Warsaw Jews in labor camps. On November 3, 1943, the Jews incarcerated in Trawniki were rounded up and shot *en masse*. While the Rabbi’s soul ascended in holy fire, his manuscripts remained safely entombed, black fire on white fire, awaiting their discovery seven years later.

In 1956, Barukh Duvdevani, an intrepid Polish-born activist with the Jewish Agency, travelled to Warsaw on a dual mission. Duvdevani, a seventh-generation direct descendent of Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, had both impeccable Hasidic credentials and a long history of service to the nascent State of Israel. He served in the fledgling military and had organized the mass immigration of Jews from Italy, Algeria, Tunis,



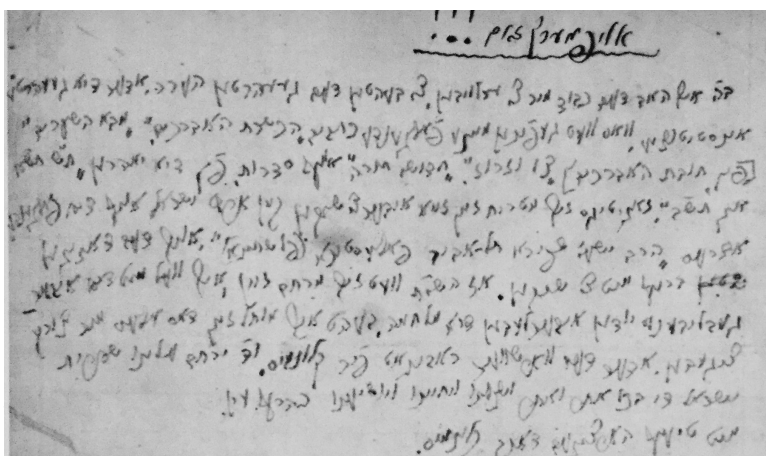
Morocco, South Africa and France. His assignment in Poland, however, came with a personal charge as well. Rabbi Elimelekh ben Porat, a former student of Rabbi Shapira living in Israel, implored Duvdevani to search for the lost prewar writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, including *Hakhsharat ha-Avreichim*, the companion volume of Rabbi Shapira’s 1932 *Hovat ha-Talmidim*, which was known to be in copyediting stage at the outbreak of the war in 1939.

Duvdevani’s efforts, as one might imagine, were frustrated by the highly fragmentary nature of the evidence he had to work with. One cache of *Oneg Shabbat* documents was found, and surviving members of the organization insisted that two more collections remained somewhere under the

wreckage of the ghetto. Where was one to look amidst the destruction of Poland's first city? Through a remarkable turn of events, Duvdevani managed to realize the dream of the surviving remnant of Piaseczno Hasidim by locating the precious manuscripts. Duvdevani described his amazing discovery in 1961, when he was summoned to testify at the Nazi War Crimes trial of the notorious war criminal Adolf Eichmann:

The staff of the Jewish Historical Institute helped me but to no avail. One day, when I had decided to search further, suddenly they brought me a will which had been found amongst these documents, of Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira in favor of his brother in the Land of Israel, the late Rabbi Yeshayahu Shapira and two other disciples who are living today in Israel. When I noticed the date, which was four months before the Warsaw Ghetto revolt, I became very excited and began reading. And I saw that he had put into the can books which he had written during the War years.⁴

The document Duvdevani discovered was a brief cover letter written by the Rebbe in ornate Yiddish prose:



ATTENTION!!!

Blessed is God. I have the honor of requesting the esteemed individual or institution that finds my enclosed writings *Hakhsharat Ha-Avreichim*, *Mavo Ha-She'arim*, (from *Hovat Ha-Avreikhim*), *Tsav ve-Zeruz*, *Torah Insights on the weekly readings for the years 5700, 5701 and 5702*, to please exert themselves to send them to the Land of Israel to the following address: Rabbi Yeshaya Shapira, Tel Aviv, Palestine. Please also send the enclosed letter. When the Blessed One will show mercy, and I and the remaining Jews survive the war, please return all materials to me or to the Warsaw Rabbinate for Kalonymus, and may God have mercy upon us, the remnant of Israel in every place, and rescue us, and sustain us, and save us in the blink of an eye.

With deep, heartfelt gratitude,
Kalonymus⁵

Switching to eloquent Rabbinic Hebrew, Rabbi Shapira then penned a message to his brother Yeshaya Shapira, describing the nature of the manuscripts and asking that they be produced for publication. This letter, Rabbi Shapira's final will, contained an exhortation to future readers of his work. "Please also print in every work," he wrote, "that I urge every single Jew to study my books, and the merit of my holy ancestors will stand by every student and his family, now and forever." The will and

5 The Rebbe's cover letter is reproduced in *Derashot* I:328. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

letter is dated 27 Tevet, 5703 (January 3, 1943) and concludes with the words “May God have mercy upon us.”

The Manuscript

Rabbi Shapira’s wartime writings were published in 1960 under the title *Aish Kodesh* (also transliterated *Esh Kodesh*). The title was not of Rabbi Shapira’s choosing—he referred to these collected sermons as simply *Torah Insights from the Years 5700, 5701 and 5702* (September 1939-July 1942), and elsewhere as *Torah Insights from the Years of Wrath* (*Hidushei Torah mi-shenot ha-za’am*).⁶ The first publishers chose instead the evocative title *Holy Fire* (*Aish Kodesh*), a term that appears occasionally in the Rebbe’s works, although never in the wartime writings themselves.⁷ The editors wished to memorialize the martyred Jews of the Holocaust, as the Hebrew word *kodesh* is at the root of the term *kidush haShem*, or “martyrdom,” in homage to those Jews whose bodies were



Title page of first edition of *Esh Kodesh* (1960)

⁶ The title is referenced in his cover letter, *Derashot* I:328. The title page reads, “Words of Torah that I spoke on Sabbaths and Holidays, 5700 5701 5702,” and signed simply, “Kalonymus.” See *Derashot* II: 16-17.

⁷ See for example *Hakhsharat ha-Avreikhim*, chapter 3 (p. 18 in the undated but revised Feldheim printing of the 1961 edition) and chapter 9 (109).

destroyed in the crematoria of the death camps.⁸ *Aish Kodesh* enjoyed such widespread regard that Rabbi Shapira himself is often referred to as “The *Aish Kodesh*,” a mark of distinction in Jewish literary convention.

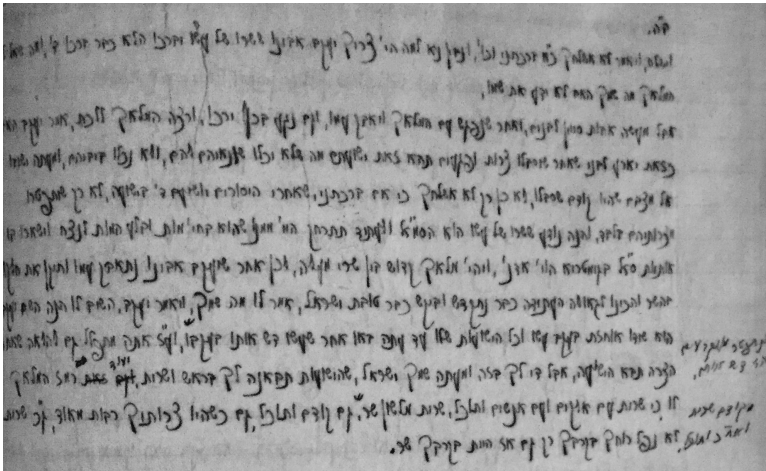
The printed version records almost 100 sermons (*derashot*) delivered between Rosh Hashanah of the Hebrew year 5700 (September 14-15, 1939) and Shabbat Hazon of 5702 (July 18, 1942), the eve of the deportations to the death camp Treblinka. Rabbi Shapira survived the first major wave of deportations, working in one of the few slave-labor “shops” that the Nazis maintained until the uprising of 1943. Understanding that his fate was at risk, Rabbi Shapira reviewed the entire manuscript and made hundreds of annotations, some of them dated, ending with his literary will and cover letter of January 3, 1943.

The manuscript text is written in two distinct hands, with the earliest entires penned in the elegant script of an anonymous scribe.⁹ His beautiful calligraphy disappears after the entry of March 9, 1940 (Pekudei-Shkalim), and the majority of the manuscript is written Rabbi Shapira's cramped style. The scribe's entries often bear additional annotations in the Rebbe's hand, one of many indications that the Rebbe subjected the text to editorial refinement

⁸ Publisher's preface, *Sefer Esh Kodesh*, Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piaseczno, 1960, unnumbered pages iii-iv.. The term *kidush Hashem* literally means “sanctification of the Name” of God. In other contexts, the term may refer to any laudatory activity that reflects well on Torah, Judaism or the Jewish people.

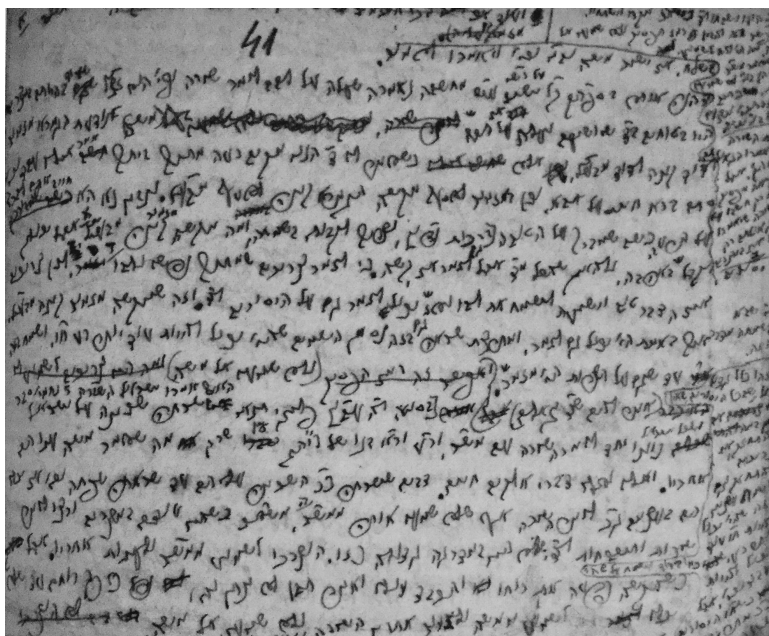
⁹ The name of the scribe is not recorded in the manuscript. Daniel Reiser received personal testimony from Avraham Hammer that Rabbi Elazar Bane recognized the script as the handwriting of a student of the Rebbe named “Nute.” His surname is unknown. Reiser, *Sermons* 1:61, note 211. Esther Farbstein was unaware of the scribe's work and mistakenly attributed the difference between the clean, elegant hand of the early entries and the cramped, difficult style of later entries to the horrible conditions present in the Ghetto (Be-seter Re'em: *Halakhah, Hagut ve-Minhagut be-yemei ha-sho'ah*, Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 2002, p. 441).

over time. The Rebbe continued this practice long after he lost his scribe; most entries bear strikeouts, corrections, and footnotes tucked into the margins of the page. Differing impressions imply that the notes were written at various times, perhaps with different writing instruments. The papers were generally used with great economy, tiny words often running to the very edge of each page. Thankfully, the Rebbe left a paragraph of instructions for his future editors which described how to understand the various and idiosyncratic copy-editing symbols used in the manuscript.¹⁰



Above: an entry written by the anonymous scribe, with a marginal annotation by the Rebbe. Following page: an entry written by the Rebbe. *Derashot* II:26 and 194.

¹⁰ See *Derashot* II:9-14 for Reiser's translation of these rules into his remarkable facsimile edition of the Rebbe's manuscript.



Four editors painstakingly deciphered the Rebbe's often difficult shorthand for the first printed edition, published in 1960 under the supervision of Rabbi Elimelekh Shapira, nephew of the Rebbe and son of his literary heir, Rabbi Yeshaya Shapira. Working with black and white copies of the original manuscript, possibly made from microfilm, the team divided the text between themselves and met every two weeks to review and revise. Hundreds of the Rebbe's emendations were absorbed directly into the printed text without comment, and given the technological limitations of the 1950s, many errors crept into the text. A revised edition appeared in 2007, improving the readability of the text significantly with modern typography, expanded acronyms and light annotation. The newer edition was not based on the original manuscript, however, so errors in the

1960 edition were preserved and sometimes even compounded.¹¹

Ten years later, a critical edition was published that carefully catalogued the strikeouts, annotations, and other emendations of the original manuscript, correcting the limitations of the 1960 and 2007 printings with a two-volume, definitive edition. Dr. Daniel Reiser, a scholar at Zefat College and Herzog College, worked with the original document *in situ* and took advantage of digital technology to expand, reveal, and ultimately decipher hundreds of difficult passages. Many of Dr. Reiser's discoveries were quite dramatic in nature, shedding light on the Rebbe's thought in a manner that was impossible to determine from the printed editions. Dr. Reiser's Hebrew work, published in 2017 under the title *Derashot mi-shenot ha-za'am* (English title: *Sermons From the Years of Rage*) is demonstrably superior to previous editions and will be used for all citations in this book.

The entries vary in length from one to ten printed pages. An offhand comment on the entry for January 13, 1940, "more of what I said I cannot recall," suggests that they were committed to paper after they were delivered orally to an audience, as writing on the Sabbath is forbidden by Jewish law.¹² The setting of most of the sermons was the traditional Saturday afternoon gathering, although some of the more formal sermons may have been offered at morning services and one was apparently delivered on

¹¹ For an exhaustive discussion of how the manuscript was deciphered, see *Derashot* 1:62-73.

¹² *Derashot* II:33. Note that while this entry for *Parashat Bo* was printed without comment in the 1960 and 2007 editions, it is only reproduced in the facsimile volume of *Derashot* as the Rebbe clearly marked it for deletion.

Friday evening.¹³ The specific nature of these gatherings, including attendees, format, and the special relevance they had for Rabbi Shapira, will be discussed below. The traditional amount of time allotted for these sermons would be twenty to thirty minutes, although many may have lasted much longer.

The entries do not correspond word-for-word with what the Rebbe discussed the previous Sabbath. For one thing, the sermons were delivered in the vernacular Yiddish, while the entries are recorded in the literary standard of rabbinic Hebrew (specific phrases in the original Yiddish are occasionally interspersed).¹⁴ Thus, depending on the Rebbe's time, health, and discretion, any given written record of the sermon might represent a highly attenuated version of the original oral presentation, or it may be a greatly expanded and more sophisticated treatise. Comparisons between his prewar and wartime sermons suggest that the Rebbe may have intended to flesh out the ideas in a revised, expanded publication.¹⁵ Large gaps of silence punctuate several weeks between entries, often for unknown reasons. The absence of an entry, however, does not indicate that the Rebbe was inactive—he may have simply chosen not to preserve a record of his sermon that week.

¹³ See *Derashot* I:54 note 186.

¹⁴ Regarding this phenomenon of Yiddish-Hebrew diglossia, see Reiser, *Derashot* I:66 n5, also his "Ha-derashah he-Hasidit—bein Yiddish le-Ivrit," *Judaicia Petropolitana* 6 (2013), 3-22 (Hebrew section).

¹⁵ For a much larger discussion of continuity and discontinuity between the Rebbe's prewar sermons and his wartime work, see Yitschak Hershkowitz, "R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira hy"d Ha-Admo"r mi-Piaseczno: Hagut ha-Shoah mul hagut tarum ha-Shoah, hemshekh o temura?" Master's Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University 5765 (2005/6).

Reading Sermons as History

Since their first publication in Hebrew in 1960, the Holocaust writings of Rabbi Shapira have been recognized as phenomenally important to researchers of theodicy.¹⁶ One of the first was Mendel Peikarz' study, *The Last Hasidic Document Written in Poland* (Hebrew, 1979).¹⁷ In English, certainly the most influential work was Nehemia Polen's pathbreaking 1994 study, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*.¹⁸ Both scholars sparked a considerable amount of scholarly activity centered on the Rebbe's wartime writings, almost all of which concentrated on understanding what Rabbi Shapira had to say about the central theological question, "where was God during the Holocaust." Scholarship subsequently advanced in several directions. At Bar-Ilan University, dissertations were completed by Yitshak Hirshkowitz and Tsvi Leshem, extending the theological discussion beyond the war years to the Rebbe's pre-war thought as well.¹⁹ English-language readers availed themselves of solid scholarship produced by James Diamond, Gershon Greenberg, Don Seeman, and a PhD dissertation at the University of Chicago by Erin

¹⁶ For an introduction to the main sources for theological of this nature, in which the Rebbe's work features prominently, see Gershon Greenberg and Assad Yedidyah, eds. *Mishpatekha tehom rabah: tagovot hegotiyut ortodoksiut la-shoah*, Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 2016.

¹⁷ Mendel Peikarz (Paikazh), *Ha-teudah he-hasidit ha-sifrutit ha-aharonah al admat Polin: Divrei ha-Rebi be-gito Varsha* Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977.

¹⁸ Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994.

¹⁹ Yitshak Herskowitz, "R' Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira hy'd, Ha-admo"r mi-Piasieczno: hagot ha-shoah mul hagot terem ha-shoah, hemshekh o temurah?" Master's Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2005. Tsvi Leshem, "Bein meshihyut le-nevuah: he-hasidut al pi ha-admo"r mi-Piasieczno," PhD Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2007.

Lieb Smokler.²⁰ Popular enthusiasm for Rabbi Shapira's work was also expressed in the publication of several hagiographic works and multiple translations of his prewar and wartime writings into English, French, Italian and Russian.²¹

One exception to the strongly theological trend of research into Rabbi Shapira's writings was a brief 1980 Hebrew-language article by a graduate student at Bar-Ilan University named Judith Thidor-Baumel.²² Titled simply "*Aish Kodesh: The Book of the Piaseczno Rebbe and its Place in Understanding Religious Life in the Warsaw Ghetto*," Thidor-Baumel made an observation that was as

²⁰ Don Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy, Hassidic Mysticism and 'Useless Suffering' in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Harvard Theological Review* 101: 3-4 (2008), 465-505. Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg, eds. *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Erin Dana Lieb [Smokler], "God in the Years of Fury: Theodicy and Anti-Theodicy in the Holocaust Writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira," PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2014.

²¹ Ron Waks, *Lehavat Aish kodesh: she'arim shel ha-admo"r mi-Piaseczno* Alon Shvut: Tevunot/Herzog, 2010, Hayim Frankel, ed. *Zikhron kodesh Aish kodesh: yuval le-aliyato al moked shel rabenu ha-kodesh ve-ha-tahor mi-Piaseczno moha"r Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira hy"d*, Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piaseczno-Grodzisk, 1993; Moshe Weinberger, *Warmed by the Fire of the Aish Kodesh: Torah from the Hillulas of Reb Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczna*, Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2015. English translations of the Rebbe's works include *A Student's Obligation: Advice from the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, Rabbi Kalonimus Kalmish Shapira, trans. Micah Odenheimer, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2004 (also translated anonymously and published by Feldheim, 2011, and into Russian by Shvut Ami in 2008), *To Heal the Soul: The Spiritual Journal of a Chasidic Rebbe*, trans. Yehoshua Starrett, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson/Rowman & Littlefield, 1995, *Sacred Fire: Torah from the Years of Fury 1939-1942*, translated by J. Hershy Worch and edited by Deborah Miller Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2000, and *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work*, trans. Andrea Cohen-Kiener, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2013 (also under the title *Experiencing the Divine: A Practical Jewish Guide*, translated by Yaacov David Shulman, Baltimore 2002). See also Catherine Chaliel, *Kalonymus Shapira: rabbi au Ghetto de Varsovie 1889-1943* Paris: Arfuyen, 2011 and in Italian, *Kalonymus Shapira Rabbino del ghetto di Varsavia*, trans. Wanna Lucatini-Vogelmann, Firenze: Giuntina, 2013.

²² Ester Yehudit Thidor-Baumel, "'Aish Kodesh,' sifro shel ha-admo"r mi-Piaseczno, u-mekomo be-havanat ha-hayim ha-dati'im be-gito Varshah," *Yalkut Moreshet* 29 (1980), 173-187.

startling as it was original: given that the entries in *Torah from the Years of Wrath* are all dated, and given that we know from multiple sources the events of the Ghetto that week, a careful historical comparison should reveal significant insight into the way in which Hasidim in the Ghetto found spiritual and intellectual tools to deal with the brutal Nazi occupation. Her brief article only dedicated four pages to providing examples, but the presumption was incredibly important.

Thidor-Baumel's thesis is well-supported by a careful comparison of the historical record of events in the Warsaw Ghetto and the sermons of the Rebbe. It is important to note that the Rebbe's recorded sermons constitute *public* documents, the representation of one man's attempt to provide the Jewish community of Warsaw with the intellectual and spiritual resources to understand, and ultimately withstand, the persecutions of the Holocaust. Unlike journals, which were written primarily as personal and private meditations (even if their authors intended them ultimately to be read by others), the entries in *Torah from the Years of Wrath* were communicated on a weekly basis, providing a glimpse into how a spiritual leader such as Rabbi Shapira attempted to place the horrific events of the prior week into the context of Jewish faith. Unlike memoirs, written long after the fact and inescapably colored by the overwhelming hindsight of the murder of millions of innocents, the Rebbe's wartime writings are literary artifacts that illuminate the thinking of a faith community in real time, providing insight into how the followers of a Hasidic Rebbe incorporated the *tremendum* of the Holocaust into their theistic *Weltanschauung*.

Reading *Torah from the Years of Wrath* for historical information is not easy. Although the document is exceptionally grounded in the events of the ghetto—the Rebbe’s Hasidim would turn to him every week, hoping for a theological message that would help them understand and accept their personal tragedies by providing context within the meaning-system of Judaism—at no point does the Rebbe explicitly use the terms “Nazi” or “German,” and generally avoids any specific reference to the occupation of Warsaw at all. Only rare, fleeting passages betray oblique references to specific Nazi *Aktionen*. Indeed, if a reader were unaware of the historical setting, it would be possible to imagine these sermons as a creation of a Hasidic thinker of 19th century, albeit somewhat obsessed with the problem of evil.

Yet when one places the sermons within the historical context of the daily and weekly experiences of the Jews in Warsaw, it becomes obvious that the Rebbe was in fact alluding to very specific occurrences of the prior week, hoping to assimilate the unthinkable into a Hasidic worldview, providing his followers with the spiritual tools of survival. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to appreciate these Sabbath discourses properly without first understanding the historical circumstances of the previous week.

Barbara Krawcowicz noted the use of this philosophical-rhetorical device in the writings of Rabbi Zalman Ehrenreich. Her suggestion that the concept, which she termed “paradigmatic thinking” following Jacob Neusner, was “a crucial element of the theological responses coming from ultra-Orthodox circles during the period of World War II:”

It was precisely the use of these eternally valid, timeless models that enabled these thinkers to describe events in such a way as to assert that the covenant between the people of Israel and God had not been disrupted. By interpreting the anti-Jewish persecution through lenses that focus on the repetitive and the recurring, ultra-Orthodox thinkers were able to uphold the tenets of traditional covenantal theodicy.²³

Or, as a Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi put it, "for the rabbis the Bible was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history...the true pulse of history often beat beneath its manifest surfaces, an invisible history that was more real than what the world, deceived by the more strident outward rhythms of power, could recognize."²⁴ Much of The Rebbe's work, particularly during the first two years of the occupation, represents an examination of how Hasidim could discern the "true pulse of history," despite the more obvious "outward rhythms of power."

A careful reading of the weekly entries also reveals a subtle use of Aesopean language, allowing Rabbi Shapira to speak to his audience in veiled terms that placed their immediate suffering on the larger canvas of what Gershon Greenberg called "meta-history." Evoking the ancient Midrashic teaching "the experience of the fathers is a sign for the sons," (*ma'ase avot siman le-banim*) Rabbi Shapira analyzes the weekly Torah portion with a view to its message for the imperiled Jews of Warsaw, helping them

²³ Barbara Krawcowicz, "Paradigmatic Thinking and Holocaust Theology," *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 22 (2014), p. 167.

²⁴ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, New York: Schocken, 1989, p. 21.

understand their incomprehensible suffering as a part of a cosmic plan, foretold thousands of years ago in the holy Torah. The Ghetto was, by definition, a tightly enclosed space, and both genuine news and baseless rumors spread rapidly through the population. Third-person accounts indicate that many Jews (sometimes numbering in the hundreds) attended Rabbi Shapira's Saturday afternoon addresses, no doubt hoping to find some way to comprehend the tragedies that befell this beleaguered community. Rabbi Shapira clearly responded to this need, and his wartime writings stand in dramatic contrast to his prewar sermons in this regard.

To date, the most extensive research on the Rebbe's work has been theological in nature, and no one has taken up the challenge posed by Esther Judith Thidor-Baumel in her 1980 article. I hope to fill that lacuna. With careful historical reconstruction, we can transport ourselves to that close chamber on 5 Dzielna street, our minds still reeling from the shock of the events that transpired over the previous week in the Ghetto. From a distance, we may hear the Rebbe speak, helping us assimilate those terrible events into our worldview, and gain the strength to persevere despite our deep fear for the future.

The Rebbe and his Hasidim

"How can I recite the *kaddish* prayer," said the recently orphaned three-year old Kalonymus Kalmish, "when I clearly see my father sitting before me in his chair?" So goes the legend as told by the elders of the Piaseczno

Hasidim.²⁵ Such ascriptions of precocious ability and transcendental spiritual sensitivity are commonly applied to Hasidic leaders by their pious followers, but in many ways this story stands out as emblematic of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira's productive, heroic, and tragically brief life. Themes of transcendent awareness of higher levels of being, the longing for a distant father separated by an illusory veil of temporal perception, and above all the refusal to abandon hope in a speedy redemption, are deep-rooted characteristics of the man who would become famous through his last and most profound work.

Kalonymus Kalmish was heir to a rich heritage of Hasidic thought, with many of the greatest minds of the movement in his family tree. His father Elimelekh (1823-1892) was the founder of the Grodzisk dynasty (named, like most Hasidic dynasties, for their place of origin: Grodzisk is the Yiddish name for Grodzisk Mazowiecki, a town in central Poland). Elimelekh's father was Rabbi Hayim Meir Shapira (1789-1849), the leader of the Hasidim of Kozhnits (Kozienice), known popularly as the "Angel" (*sorof*) of Moglenits (Mogielnica) who was in turn a grandson of Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk (1717-1787), one of the most influential Hasidic leaders of the 18th century. Kalonymus Kalmish's mother Hanah Berakhah Szternfeld also descended from an impressive Hasidic background, and she named her youngest child after her grandfather

²⁵ Aharon Sorasky, "Mi-toledot ha-admor ha-kadosh maran Rabi Kalonimus Kalmish Shapira zts"l hy"d mi-Piaseczno," printed as an appendix to the Feldheim 2007 printing of *Aish Kodesh*, pages 267-322.

Kalonymus Kalman Epstein (1751-1823), author of the classic *Ma'or va-Shemesh*.²⁶

Cognoscenti of Hasidic dynasties will recognize these names as royalty, but what exactly is Hasidism? The movement takes its name from the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is often translated as “kindness,” but in this context is might be better understood as “going beyond the letter of the law.” Although the term has ancient roots (e.g. Psalms 86:2, *guard my soul, for I am a hasid*), it was adopted as a designator for the Jewish religious revival that developed in the mid-18th century in Eastern Europe. Pre-Hasidic Jewish spirituality privileged rigorous study of the Talmud, an ancient legal text written in Aramaic that required years of intense training to decipher. The Talmudic elite were concentrated in the northern regions of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, and largely viewed Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilnius (“the Vilna Gaon,” 1720-1797) as the exemplar of Jewish intellectual attainment. Despite the valorization of textual literacy in classical Rabbinic sources, few Jews could aspire to such levels of academic excellence, as even rudimentary education required significant expenditure to provide children with anything more than a few years of full-time education. Women in particular received little access to Talmudic training, although Yiddish-language adaptations of Jewish thought remained popular among the larger masses. On the whole, Jews in the southern regions of Eastern Europe often felt disenfranchised and even abandoned from the main

²⁶ See Polen, *Holy Fire*, xiii. The Rebbe's Hebrew family name was Latinized to Szapiro in Polish, but scholarly convention has adopted the spelling “Shapira” in English, following the usage of the descendants of the Rebbe's surviving Israeli brother. The Rebbe preferred the diminutive form Kalonymus Kalmish, which distinguished him from his illustrious great-grandfather, Kalonymus Kalman. For an example of the Rebbe's own transliteration of his name into Roman letters as Szapiro, see his handwritten name reproduced in *Derashot* 1:326.

centers of Talmudic activity, a problem which was exacerbated by the sometimes corrupt practices of established leadership.²⁷

Seeking spiritual fulfillment that was not readily provided by the intellectual meritocracy of the Lithuanian Rabbinical seminaries, a spontaneous folk religiosity flourished in Ukraine and southern Poland. Emphasizing song and camaraderie, these Jews were viewed with suspicion by the Lithuanian Jews and their sober study of the holy texts. Thus the Hasidic movement emerged against the backdrop of the elitist Judaism of Lithuania on the one hand and the credulous and sometimes antinomian folk practices of southeastern Europe on the other.

Rebelling against what many perceived as a desiccated, reified Judaism that prized mental acuity at the expense of enthusiastic prayer, song, and fellowship, the movement coalesced around the figure of Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer (c. 1700-1760), a remarkable spiritual leader known to his followers as the Ba'al Shem Tov. Emphasizing the value of the faith of the common Jew, the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings spread far and wide, sparking bitter antagonism between the emerging Hasidic Jews and the traditionalist Talmudic Jews, dubbed "opponents" (*mitnagdim*) because of their rejectionist stance.

The intellectual inheritors of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings spread and bifurcated again and again, with followers spontaneously joining one Rebbe or another, sometimes based on geographic proximity, sometimes based on

²⁷ See Gershon David Hundert, ed. *Essential Papers in Hasidism* New York: New York University Press, 1991 and Ada Rappaport-Albert, ed. *Hasidism Reappraised* London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997.

cultural or intellectual affinity. One important third-generation Rebbe was Elimelekh of Lizhensk mentioned above, from whom Piaseczno Hasidism derives.

Theologically and pragmatically, Hasidism rests on a foundation recognizable to all Orthodox Jews: belief in a omnipotent Creator, whose covenant with the Jewish people through the Torah is eternally binding and expressed through 613 commandments, which are encoded in the first five books of the Bible and elucidated through Rabbinic writings such as the Talmud. The life cycles and ritual calendars of Hasidic Jews also follow the traditional pattern, with the Sabbath an inviolate day of rest and the year punctuated by celebrations and fast days. Highly gendered, both traditionalist and Hasidic Jews recognize major differences between the roles of women and men in communal and family life, and observe detailed laws regulating marital intimacy. Both traditionalist Lithuanian Jews and Hasidim recognize the value of the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, but Mitnagdic Jews (also known as "Litvaks," meaning Lithuanians) restrict its study to only the most accomplished students, observing the medieval bans that proscribed Kabbalistic study for women and men under the age of forty. By contrast, Hasidim celebrate Kabbalistic study even by children, so long as it is expressed in the literature such as the *Tanya*, a late eighteenth century work authored by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of the Chabad school of Hasidism.

Hasidim also favored adherence to outmoded styles of dress and other outward identifiers of ethnicity such as untrimmed beards. Hasidim were usually organized in tight social units under the authoritative leadership of a single Rabbi (often called Rebbe, rhymes with "ready"),

who typically inherited his position from his father or father-in-law.

Rabbi Shapira meditated on the essence of Hasidism in several of his works. For him, the spiritual enlightenment engendered by Hasidism was intrinsically related to the phenomenon of prophecy.²⁸ Although prophetic insight into future events (*nevuah le-atid*) had ended in the biblical period, argued the Rebbe, the communication between the Divine and creation persisted in the form of prophetic instruction (*nevuah le-hadrakhah*). Perhaps the most succinct description of what Hasidism meant to him is provided in his popular work, *The Obligation of Students*, beautifully rendered into English by Micah Odenheimer:

You may ask: What is Hasidism and in what way is a Hasid who serves God greater than someone who serves God but is not a Hasid? Be aware that this is impossible to explain. Hasidism is not something merely intellectual, and thus explainable. The intellectual component of Hasidism is only one part of it, and is itself revealed only after one has engaged in the service of God. This is the same as in prophecy. It is impossible to rationally explain prophecy. A prophet is the only one who actually understands the nature of prophecy—and for him, the phenomenon seems so simple and obvious that he cannot understand why others do not see what he does, as Scripture states in Amos 3:8: *the Lord, God, has spoken, who will not prophesy?*

²⁸ Daniel Reiser, "'To Rend the Entire Veil': Prophecy in the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piazecna and its Renewal in the Twentieth Century," *Modern Judaism* 34, 3 (2014), pp. 334-352, Leshem, "Bein meshihiyut."

Amos was unable to comprehend how anyone would not experience prophecy when God had spoken.

This is also the case in Hasidism, which is the revelation of the tiny spark of prophecy that exists within each Jew (as the Talmud states in *Pesahim* 66a: "Jews are the children of prophets"). It is impossible to explain Hasidism with the intellect. Neither the Hasidic way of serving God nor the Hasid's perception of the world can be explained rationally. It is impossible to intellectually describe how a true Hasid prays, how his soul becomes inflamed and bound to supernal holiness, or how he sees in the Torah and in the commandments the lovely splendor of God, the world's glory, and he sees a spark of His presence everywhere in the world. It is difficult even for the Hasid himself to comprehend these matters. When he sees and perceives these things during his periods of spiritual ascent and burning enthusiasm they seem simple and certain, yet if he falls from his spiritual level, he himself cannot understand them.²⁹

Piaseczno

The town of Piaseczno (pronounced Pee-ah-SECH-no), some ten kilometers south of the capital city Warsaw in central Poland, was home to approximately 2,700

²⁹ *A Student's Obligation: Advice from the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, translated by Micah Odenheimer, Lanham, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004, 99. Transliteration was slightly altered to conform with the system used in this publication.

inhabitants at the turn of the 20th century.³⁰ The Jewish community in this village dated back centuries and its presence was formally acknowledged in the municipal reforms of 1869. Demographically, Piaseczno was unremarkable for Polish towns of its size, with Jews making up forty percent of its population at the end of the nineteenth century. The town enjoyed significant growth in the first two decades of the twentieth century, its population tripling by 1918, with the Jewish share of the population rising to 56%, perhaps due to the proximity of Warsaw and the refugee traffic created by the First World War.³¹ Linkages between the hamlet and the capital extended beyond the economic and demographic, a phenomenon that extended to the Hasidic community as well: after the establishment of his Yeshiva (religious school) in Warsaw, *Da'at Moshe*, Rabbi Shapira would spend his summers in Piaseczno.

When Kalonymus Kalmish's father Elimelekh died in 1892, he left behind five children: three from a previous marriage, and two from his second marriage to Hanah Berakhah Szternfeld. The youngest was Kalonymus Kalmish, who turned three that year. Rabbi Elimelekh lavished attention on his youngest son, and numerous stories demonstrate how the father anticipated greatness for him. When Hasidim would approach Rabbi Elimelekh with *kvitlekh*, written petitions for various personal needs, Rabbi Elimelekh would direct them to place the notes

³⁰ Juliusz Łukasiewicz, "Powiat Piaseczyński w latach 1867-1914," in Jerzego Antoniewicza, ed., *Studia i Materiały do Dziejów Piaseczna Powiatu Piaseczyńskiego* Warsaw: Drukarnia im. Rewolucji Październikowej w Warszawie, 1973, 239-247.

³¹ Józef Kazimierski, "Miasto Piaseczno i Powiat Piaseczyński w latach Wojny i Okupacji Hitlerowskiej," in Jerzego Antoniewicza, ed., *Studia i Materiały do Dziejów Piaseczna Powiatu Piaseczyńskiego* Warsaw: Drukarnia im. Rewolucji Październikowej w Warszawie, 1973, 253-267.

under the baby's pillow and wait for the answer to come from Heaven. He also insisted on various pious practices, such as ritually washing the baby's hands and covering his head, arguing that the destiny of the young Kalonymus Kalmish required an additional level of scrupulousness. For his part, the precocious Kalonymus Kalmish later claimed to have distinct memories of his father, even his specific religious practices and teachings. In one poignant memory, he recalled bursting into tears in synagogue, calling out to his father who was leading the congregation. Rabbi Elimelekh responded, "you are calling your father? I am also calling my Father!"³²

After Rabbi Elimelekh's passing, Kalonymus Kalmish was raised by his mother, a well-known Hasidic leader in her own right. Hannah Berakhah was famous for her erudition and even her unusual adoption of practices such as the bestowal of blessings, which were usually reserved for male Hasidic leaders.³³ She moved young Kalonymus Kalmish to nearby Grodzisk, home to the famous Hasidic dynasty of her family, where Yerahmiel Moshe, an older grandson of Rabbi Elimelekh from his first marriage, took responsibility to educate the boy. Yerahmiel Moshe was not only Kalonymus Kalmish's nephew, he also became his father-in-law when, at 16, Kalonymus Kalmish married his daughter Rahel Hayah Miriam. Yerahmiel Moshe was Kalonymus Kalmish's principal teacher in Kabbalah for four years until his untimely passing in 1909.

Bereft of its leader, the Jewish community of Piaseczno was faced with a dilemma: should they follow the late Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe's son Rabbi Aharon Yehiel, or choose

³² Sorasky, "Mi-toledot ha-admo"r," 277.

³³ Polen, *Holy Fire*, 158 note 1.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish, the brilliant but untested 20-year-old son-in-law? Supporters of Rabbi Aharon Yehiel argued for the traditional preservation of the paternal line, but those backing Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish pointed out several telling gestures made by the late Rabbi Yerachmiel Moshe during the illness that preceded his passing, such as his granting to Kalonymus Kalmish the privilege of reciting the *Akadmot* prayer on the holiday of Shavuot, an honor typically reserved for the Rebbe of Grodzisk alone.³⁴

Rabbi Shapira—now known, by Hasidic custom, as "the Rebbe" to his followers—adopted a leadership style that exemplified humility and compassion. He preempted the potentially corrosive dynastic struggle by leaving the seat of the Hasidic court of Grodzisk and returning to his home town of Piaseczno immediately upon the conclusion of the seven-day mourning period for his father-in-law. Despite unsolicited statements of support by many Hasidic luminaries, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish preferred to avoid the attendant controversy by retreating to the smaller, less prestigious village.

His return immediately transformed the town into a magnet for followers of the fledgling Hasidic court led by the already famous 20-year-old Rebbe. His reticence to accept communal honor was demonstrated again three years later, when the leaders of Piaseczno begged him to take the position of town Rabbi, recently vacated with the passing of the former Rabbi. The Rebbe firmly refused the proposition, arguing that the deceased Rabbi's son should receive the position. Ultimately, the community leaders persuaded the Rebbe to relent, but he insisted on two conditions: first, the former Rabbi's son would be appointed Chief Judge (*Dayan*) of Piaseczno. Second, the

³⁴ Sorasky, "Mi-Toledot ha-admo"r," 291.

Rebbe would personally receive no salary for his service to the town: all remuneration would be directed exclusively to the late Rabbi's widow.

Rabbi Aaron Sorasky, the principal biographer of the Rebbe, describes his daily routine with color and piety. Rising before dawn, the Rebbe would engage in deep study of the Talmud. When the time for morning devotions arrived, the Rebbe would make his way to synagogue, where he encouraged children to crowd around him in a semi-circle and recite their Hebrew prayers aloud and with great fervor. This was a source of some consternation to the adult worshippers. The Rebbe ignored protests for decorum, seeking instead to nurture the spontaneous ardor of youth, a concept that would figure prominently in his later written work.³⁵

The remainder of the Rebbe's day was taken up by a long queue of Hasidim seeking his aid and counsel on a wide variety of personal issues. Visitors would prepare a written request for guidance and blessing, listing the petitioner's name and mother's name, along with a brief statement of the request. The Rebbe would read each *kvittel* and receive the petitioner in turn, often concluding the visits only after midnight. Between each visit, the Rebbe would make personal notes and observations, some of which would

³⁵ Mr. Chaim Kenner, an elderly survivor from the Ghetto, vividly relates his childhood experience of praying with the Rebbe in Hatsik Varsha, "Ha-Admor mi-Piasezna Aish Kodesh," <https://youtu.be/i0a2Mh8UFkk> (accessed June 14, 2017). Simha Rotem also confirmed the warm reception he received from the Rebbe when, as a child, he was sent to the Rebbe on errands from his father. See Kazik (Simha Rotem), *Memoirs of a Warsaw Ghetto Fighter*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, p. 3.

later appear in his own spiritual journal, published posthumously under the title *Tsav ve-zeruz*.³⁶

After World War I the Rebbe moved his principal residence to Warsaw, yet he continued to maintain close connections with the smaller community, visiting it for several weeks at a time. In 1923 the Rebbe established a Hasidic rabbinic seminary in Warsaw, *Da'at Moshe*, named after his father-in-law, which became the central focus of his communal and literary activity.

Jewish Warsaw

The Jewish presence in Poland dated back centuries, when rising antisemitism in Western Europe and increased economic opportunity drew Jewish migrants eastward. For much of the second millennium of the Common Era, Jews considered Poland a rare haven for a distressed people: the Hebrew translation of the term *Polin* ("Poland") was fancifully rendered as *po lin*: "here there is rest." Indeed, with the exception of some notable outbursts of ethnic upheavals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Jews lived peaceably alongside their Christian neighbors in general amity until the late 19th century. Economically, Poland was a highly segmented society, with the vast majority of the population living in rural areas and engaging in agrarian pursuits. Jews were concentrated in villages, towns and increasingly in cities, and their economic profile heavily leaned toward small commerce. In the premodern period, this ethnic division of labor

³⁶ *Tsav ve-zeruz* was published in a single volume with *Hakhsharat ha-Avreikhim* and *Mavo ha-She'arim* by the Va'ad Hasidei Piaseczno in Jerusalem, 1962. These works, composed but not published before the war, are discussed briefly below. *Tsav ve-Zeruz* was beautifully translated by Yehoshua Starrett and published under the title *To Heal the Soul: The Spiritual Journal of a Chasidic Rebbe*, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson/Rowman & Littlefield, 1995.

created a tense but relatively stable symbiosis between the Jewish and non-Jewish populations.

Ironically, one of the most prominent historians to chronicle the beginnings of Warsaw Jewry was also the principal recorders of its destruction: Emmanuel Ringelblum, director of the underground Oneg Shabbat archive that preserved the Rebbe's works. In a 1932 study, Ringelblum traced the Warsaw Jewish community back to the fourteenth century. Jews were concentrated on a single L-shaped street some 900 feet long, terminating in the city center at a stone synagogue on Donaj street (pronounced "do-nai"). The name may even have been derived from the sound of Jewish prayer heard by passers-by.³⁷

The decades before and especially after the turn of the twentieth century witnessed profound changes in the Jewish population of Warsaw. The Tsarist regime imposed increasingly onerous restrictions on the Jews, including frequent expulsions, and pogrom violence swept the region from the early 1880s. Nevertheless, the Jewish population grew apace. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Jews constituted 15 percent of the overall population of Warsaw and eventually reached a peak of 45 percent of the city in 1917, but the highly urbanized Jews made up only ten percent of the total population of Poland as a whole. By the end of the 1930s, the city had grown rapidly but with emigration the Jewish community remained fairly stable. In 1938 Warsaw was home to 368,000 Jews, the largest concentration in the world after New York City.³⁸

³⁷ Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, eds., *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009, 3.

³⁸ Engelking and Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto*, 15.

The Jews of Warsaw were overwhelmingly involved in petty commerce, eking out a living by engaging in trade and small manufacturing. Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer grew up in Warsaw's Jewish quarter. In 1940 he reflected on the economic activity of "those" streets, meaning the poorer, less desirable parts of the city:

"Those" streets were Dzielna, Pawia, Geśia, Miła, Niska, Stawki, Muranowski Square, and above all Nalewki and Franciszkańska Streets. There was a constant uproar and confusion there. Those Jews traded before the first war with Vladivostok, Pietropavlosk, and even China. Their shops were crammed with goods piled up to the ceiling. Rents in these areas were high, because every flat was a little business. Nobody would honestly be able to count the little factories that were there. During the day, the babble of bargaining voices never faltered even for a moment. There were also houses of learning and Hassid[ic] shtiebels, but they were not noticeable among the shops, workshops, and factories that surrounded them. In "those" streets, people walked at a quickened pace, and even when they wanted to go somewhere nearby, they got on a tram. Thousands of traveling salesmen went off from here with goods around even the farthest districts. They met up afterward in restaurants and little hotels (all known as the "Hôtel de la Bedbug"), joked, and admired one another as they told how tricks had helped them in their trading...

Almost every flat in "those" streets was also a little shop or boardinghouse. The unloading of goods that had been brought in never ceased. In Geśia Street there were enormous merchants'

warehouses, where clients from all over Poland were served. Here they talked about rising and falling share prices, commented on exchange rates for foreign currencies; here they were interested in whether the pound sterling would go up. Here the Hasidim put on stiff collars and ties because it helped in business. Here Jewish newspapers were snapped up in the morning, here masses of Litvaks could be seen in the streets...It is difficult to imagine that all this pulsating and glittering life has disappeared and that this enormous collection of human uniqueness has been wiped from the earth.³⁹

Warsaw endured rapid political and economic change throughout the nineteenth century. Absorbed into the Russian Empire as part of the partitions of Poland, the population seethed with resentment and rebelled with some frequency before the Romanov dynasty's downfall in late 1917. Poles and Jews frequently found themselves making common cause against the foreign rulers, engendering a significant movement toward Polish-Jewish social *rapprochement*. The Polish-Jewish synthesis mirrored in many ways the similar German-Jewish phenomenon, but like its western neighbor, this modernizing mood of coexistence was expressed principally in Warsaw's most liberal circles and did not reach deeply into the rural Polish hinterland or the insular Jewish Orthodox population.

Jews in particular experienced rapid internal transformation at the turn of the 20th century. Several waves of pogrom violence in the south-western Russian

³⁹ Forverts, July 2 1944, cited in Engelking and Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto*, 23-24.

Empire dislodged the traditional political quiescence of the Jewish population, and many turned their backs on traditional Orthodoxy in favor of newly formed mass movements that promised to solve social ills with one or another broad, bold idea. Some chose to identify closely with middle-class urban Polish values, replacing Yiddish with Polish and even converting to Catholicism. Others simply chose to leave Poland for the economic opportunity and personal freedoms promised by the United States. The burgeoning Zionist movement made considerable inroads among Polish Jewry, promising a secular redemption with a return to the land of Israel. Finally, a significant number of Jewish youth were attracted to various shadings of Socialism, which promised an end to human strife with the radical economic transformation of Polish society.⁴⁰

Rabbi Shapira's Prewar Writings

The Rebbe railed against the failure of the religious establishment to keep Polish-Jewish youth inspired by traditional Judaism. He was especially concerned that the traditional rabbinic leadership failed to understand the gravity of the threat of assimilation. Speaking at an undated interwar conference of the Council to Preserve the Yeshivot of Poland and Lithuania, the Rebbe decried the lack of concern for the broad masses of Jewish youth:

⁴⁰ For an overview of the several ideological opportunities pursued by Eastern European Jewry in the early twentieth century, see Henry Abramson, "The End of Intimate Insularity: New Narratives of Jewish History in the Post-Soviet Era," *Construction and Deconstruction of National Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Ed. Tadayuki Hayashi, Sapporo: Hokkaido University, 2003, 87-115; "Two Jews, Three Opinions: Politics in the Shtetl at the Turn of the 20th Century," *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*, Ed. Steven Katz, New York: New York University Press, 2007, 85-101.

Once, we used to concern ourselves that the students who left the *heder* [traditional religious primary school] would continue learning Torah, and our concern still deserves encouragement. In those days, it was necessary for them to continue studying, in order that they be learned people of Torah, but now it is necessary *for them to remain Jews*. Today we see that the majority of those who do not continue to study Torah simply leave the fold, Heaven forbid, shave their beards and desecrate the Sabbath. I am not a fool to suggest that only the Yeshivah students will remain Jewish, those people and no more, and we should be satisfied. Should we say that it would be sufficient that in every city only the Rabbi, the ritual slaughterer and the assistant be Jews, and the rest of the population not?!

Consider this: approximately ten thousand students currently study, out of several million Jews, may there be no evil eye, in Poland and Lithuania—should they be the only remnant of faithful Jewry? Shall we look beyond the Rabbis and the ritual slaughterers of every city? The Jewish people, the entirety of Israel is what we require! All of them must be true to God and His Torah! Yet we hope only that the students will themselves sanctify the entire generation, they will fortify it with Torah and Divine service.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Derekh ha-Melekh*, 462.

The Rebbe also felt the pain that these dramatic social and demographic changes wrought inside the Jewish home:

The Satan rises up against our sons and daughters in the form of ideological movements to poison their souls and to defile their bodies with heresy and other vile and disgusting sins, Heaven forbid.

There are homes in which the father returns from the ritual bath and prayer on Friday night dressed in his Sabbath finery, and wishes to inspire the holy flames of God and the Sabbath in his *kiddush* prayer, while his son sits and smokes cigarettes, Heaven forbid, or reads some filthy publication that defiles body and soul, Heaven forbid, or the children speak of whatever depravity occurred in the theatre. Some of them even abandon the purity of the Jewish home and go to the theatre to sin and debase themselves and the entire Jewish people. And the father looks on, his heart shrinks and his thoughts fade as the days pass in decline and decay, like a prince who is held in lengthy captivity by drunken, worthless people, until he loses his lofty soul and exalted wisdom and becomes ignorant, even heretical, knowing little more than what he eats and his material possessions. A man without aspirations, without lofty ambitions. Even if he occasionally recalls days long past, when he was a young Hasid, a student of Torah, and he wishes to arouse himself spiritually, he falls yet again, saying "what am I, what is my life, the weekdays with their commercial

activities are hellish, and this is my house, the house of Israel.⁴²

By the early thirties the Rebbe developed a master plan to reverse the downward trend. He outlined a major multi-volume literary project, which he hoped would expand the mission far beyond a few hundred students and Hasidim in his school and court. Only two of the publications appeared in his lifetime. Two others survived the war in manuscript form, buried along with his wartime sermons in the Oneg Shabbat archive, along with a tiny fragment of a fifth work. Taken together, these works outline the Rebbe's comprehensive plan for the spiritual renewal of the Jewish people.

The first and most well-known of the Rebbe's works was *The Obligation of Students* (*Hovat Ha-Talmidim*, 1932). It received immediate acclaim throughout Eastern Europe, and has demonstrated its continued relevance through multiple printings and translations into the 21st century. *The Obligation of Students* is a bold, highly original work directed at adolescent readers. The book is composed of three distinct sections: a long introduction intended for parents and teachers, followed by *The Obligation of Students* proper, and then a sizable appendix consisting of three kabbalistic essays explicitly written for older students in their late teens and early twenties. The overall purpose of *The Obligation of Students* was stated on the cover page of the first edition: "to penetrate into the depths of the student, reveal his soul, to train him in Torah, divine service, the ways of Hasidism and to bind his soul to God." Interwar Polish Jewry, according to the Rebbe's analysis, was plagued by a reification of the spirit, a

⁴² *Mavo ha-she'arim*, 273-274 (Chapter 8 in the updated Feldheim publication of the 1961 edition).

stiffening of religious observance into desiccated fragments of rituals that said more about petty allegiances to this or that sect without inspiring their practitioners to greater advances of the soul. *The Obligation of Students* represented an attempt to halt this corrosive trend by inspiring students at a very young age, well before they could be jaded by the hypocrisy and cynicism of adulthood. The Rebbe noted with alarm the centrifugal ideological forces threatening observant youth, but was in reality more concerned that traditional leadership had abandoned the larger cause by focussing on irrelevant minutiae. He lamented the dire situation in his preface:

We should be heartsick, however, and our hair should stand on end when we see the way the younger generation has turned to heresy and has lost all spiritual discipline. They possess neither faith, nor fear of God, nor knowledge of Torah. They have actually come to despise God and His servants, the people of Israel. The administrators and deans of the yeshivot, who are totally immersed in the life of the yeshivah and its students and encounter only the elite of our youth, are unaware of the gravity of the problem. They console themselves, saying: "Yes, it may be true that many of our young people have freed themselves of any commitment to Torah, but still, Israel has not been abandoned. There are still young men, sons of our people, outstanding in their Judaic scholarship, whose heart is steadfast with the Lord." Poke your heads outside of the four cubits of your yeshiva! You will see the great number of people who have broken from the observances of our faith, may God have mercy on

them and on us. You will see houses of study where the destruction of Jerusalem has been reenacted. Once they were filled with Torah scholars, now they have become empty, and instead groups and organizations whose goals include the dissemination of heresy and the rejection of Torah have been filled with members. In former good days, even the laborers and merchants who were not necessarily scholars were at least faithful Jews. Now their youth have denied Torah, have wandered and fallen into a great depth of spiritual darkness. Should we be satisfied with merely the handful of students who attend our yeshivot? Is this the entirety of the people of Israel?⁴³

The Obligation of Students is a remarkable work. After the lengthy preface explicitly intended for parents and teachers, the tone changes dramatically as the Rebbe addressed his intended audience of pre-adolescents. He spoke like a kindly grandfather, bending down and smiling as he explained how a child should slowly incorporate the spiritual wealth of Judaism into his or her being. “Perhaps this description arouses in you the following unsettling thought,” wrote the Rebbe in the introductory chapter entitled “A Call to the Student:”

You love to play with your friends, to be wild and mischievous sometimes. Along we come and approach you with the intent of depriving you of your childhood, making you silent, sedentary, and old before your time. This is absolutely not so. You

⁴³ This passage (p. 8) and all others from *The Obligation of the Students* are taken from Micah Odenheimer's lyrical translation (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

will remain young. You will go on playing with your friends. And you will still reach the spiritual goal we've portrayed. You just have to know how to play and how to be wild, and to realize and have faith at the same time that God's kingship extends everywhere, and that He sees everything, even your play. No matter how spiritually developed a human being may become, he must still continue to eat and drink and attend to his physical needs. Similarly, a child must play.⁴⁴

The Rebbe's larger ambitions for the child are also spelled out, although in a manner that is meant to empower, not overwhelm. This is precisely the meaning of the title, *The Obligation of Students*:

Your main task is to expel the evil inclination from your midst. We certainly don't expect you to accomplish this all at once, to wake up one morning and find yourself purified in every fragment of your being, healed of every trace of malady. That is an impossibility. All that is asked of you is to begin the task, to begin and to completely give yourself over to it. We can compare our situation to that of a king, whose enemy has stolen in and is dwelling in his palace. If the minister in charge of the palace attempts with all his strength to expel the enemy, the king won't be angry with him, nor will he abandon him. The king will help him with the battle and will quickly move in to occupy each room and every foot of the castle from which the enemy is ejected. But if the

⁴⁴ *Obligation*, 25.

minister stays idle and neglects to do battle with the enemy and wage war, and especially if the king feels that the minister has made a secret pact with the enemy and is taking orders from him, the king will become inflamed with anger. Incensed, he will reproach the minister and accuse him of being a deceitful traitor. "You have given my home to my enemy," he will say, "and have made peace with him, and you have the audacity to try and fool me by declaring that I am your king and you are my servant?"⁴⁵

The bulk of the book concentrates on practical spiritual exercises and guidance to gather the isolated sparks of religious fervor that a child experiences and form them into a holy flame of Hasidic energy. Throughout *The Obligation of Students*, the Rebbe is supportive and understanding, full of confidence in the abilities of his readers:

A person is able to limit his actions even when he is asleep; his tossing and turning stops at the edge of his bed. Before he falls to the ground, he senses that he must roll the other way, back toward the center of his bed. Although he is asleep and unaware, the awareness that he possesses when awake continues to limit his movements, even in its apparent absence. The same is true in all matters. Those thoughts and opinions that are permanently established in a person have the capacity to restrain him completely even when he has lost his normal conscious awareness...if you consider and

⁴⁵ *Obligation*, 65-66.

resolve many times not to become angry, you can have weak nerves and even lose your awareness in the midst of anger, yet you will still be governed by the understanding that you have fixed into your consciousness. Even when your temper flares, you will not give—even verbally—to rage and reproach.⁴⁶

The third and final section of *The Obligation of Students* is a surprisingly deep introduction to kabbalistic thought in general, and the Rebbe's techniques of spiritual arousal through visualization.⁴⁷ Hasidism encourages the broad dissemination of esoteric wisdom, but inclusion of this material in a children's book was exceptional. Among Lithuanian Jews, it was well outside the norm, and probably served to limit its wide circulation in those circles. The deeper material, however, was clearly central to the Rebbe's plan.

The Rebbe's refusal to hold back these advanced techniques and ideas from children is comprehensible in the light of the other work published in his lifetime, *B'nei Mahashavah Tovah*. Unlike *The Obligation of Students*, this much smaller work was distributed secretly to the Rebbe's most devout and gifted Hasidim. The title of this mysterious work expresses ambiguities that are difficult to capture in English. Literally it translates as "Children of Good Thought." On one level, this is an allusion to the kabbalistic meditative visualization techniques ("Good Thought") sketched out in final section of *The Obligation of*

⁴⁶ *Obligation*, 77-78.

⁴⁷ Daniel Reiser, "Historicism and/or Phenomenology in The Study Of Jewish Mysticism: Imagery Techniques in the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira as a Case Study," *Modern Judaism* 36, 1 (2016), pp. 1-16.

Students. Thus the book directed at adolescents served as a general introduction to the concept of visualization, whereas *B'nei Mahashavah Tovah* is a practical user's guide. Secondly, the term "children of," in rabbinic Hebrew idiom, need not be taken literally, rather it can be understood as "students of" or even "people who have Good Thought in common." The Rebbe's explicit purpose in writing this short book was to foster the development of a network of cells made up of inspired young Hasidim, utterly dedicated to the redemption of the generation.

B'nei Mahashavah Tovah set forth an organizational platform for the creation and maintenance of small Hasidic fellowships, young men who would gather regularly to reinforce each other and promote spiritual awareness throughout Poland. The Rebbe's plan, including codes of personal and communal behavior, evoked a style of leadership that drew heavily from earlier kabbalistic fellowships like the sixteenth-century Safed Circle, the seventeenth-century associates surrounding Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, and the eighteenth-century followers of the early Hasidic masters. The rules for the operation of the Rebbe's fellowship reveal its intended nature:

One: The Statement of Commitment

...Whoever wishes to join the group must sign the statement that appears below. This statement should be written (in Hebrew) in the same script used for Torah scrolls..."With a willing heart and the desire of all my soul, I make a commitment to join the members of this holy society...my intent being that with its help I will wash and purify my body and spirit, sanctify them with the sanctity of

the holy God, and connect them to the service of God with willing and unwavering thought, speech and action...”

From this moment on, do not regard yourself as a lowly person, an animalistic person...you are elevated, and things that are fit for others are forbidden to you...This is not to say that you should consider yourself a superior personality and grow proud, heaven forbid. To the contrary, make yourself as nothing before every Jew.

Three: How Often to Meet

The group must meet no less than three times a week...

Four: Torah Learning

At your meetings, do not engage in trivial chatter. Everyone present should learn whatever he desires: Talmud, mishnah and so forth. But once a week (or more often, as the majority decides) hold a joint learning session...

Six: Drinking L'chaim

From time to time, it is good to have a drink together—not to grow drunk and rowdy, heaven forbid, but in the Hasidic manner: in order to bond more closely and also to awaken your spirit...Even if a group member does not usually drink alcohol because of poor health (Heaven forbid), he should dilute some alcohol with water and drink along with everyone else.

Seven: Song and Dance

After having a drink, sing an inspiring tune such as Yedid Nefesh, Adon Olam, Mizmor L'Dovid ("God is my Shepherd, I will not lack"), and so forth. If your spirits are aflame and you want to dance together, then do so—as long as you do not spend the entire time drinking, singing and dancing.

Eight: The Camp of God's Presence

View your meeting place as a sanctified space, the center of the world. It is a bath house where souls are washed and purified. You are entering the camp of God's Presence, here in this space...

Nine: One-on-One Camaraderie

This holy society stands upon three principles: (a) the bonding of its members, (b) their love for each other and (c) their closeness to each other...every member should choose one other person to whom he will reveal all the secrets of his heart, in both spiritual and physical matters: his worries and joys, his failures and successes.

Ten: Keep a Low Profile

Group members should neither speak about nor publicize this holy group, its ways and activities...⁴⁸

A decade after the publication of *B'nei Mahashavah Tovah*, approximately ninety-two percent of the 3,250,000 Jews

⁴⁸ Translation by Yaakov David Shulman, under the title "Experiencing the Divine: A Practical Jewish Guide," <http://www.shulman-writer.com/experiencing-the-divine.html>, accessed August 29, 2017.

living in Poland would be murdered. His vision, however, was ultimately expressed in similar post-war programs adopted by both Chabad Hasidim and Lithuanian kollels, whose activity worldwide has confirmed the wisdom of the Rebbe's vision. Nevertheless, his program provides some insight into what his followers, particularly his closest Hasidim, must have experienced in his presence in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The remainder of the Rebbe's literary *oeuvre* was published posthumously. It includes a large volume of his prewar sermons entitled *Derekh Ha-Melekh* ("The Way of the King"), and three works unearthed along with the sermons in the Oneg Shabbat archive: *Hakhsharat Ha-Avreikhim*, *Mavo Ha-She'arim*, and *Tsav Ve-Zeruz*. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avreikhim* ("The Preparation of Young Men") and *Mavo Ha-She'arim* ("The Introduction to the Gates") are sequels to *The Obligation of Students*, written as literary milestones along the path described in *B'nei Mahashavah Tovah*.

In *Tsav Ve-Zeruz*, his personal spiritual diary, the Rebbe provides a glimpse—often discomfiting—into his deepest internal meditations. He reflects, for example, on his spontaneous decision, made during a moment of extreme joy during the dancing on the holiday of Simhat Torah, to turn somersaults in the synagogue.⁴⁹ He spared nothing, certainly not his personal dignity, in his relentless effort to come closer to God. One remarkable passage described his meditation on searching for ways to improve his spiritual life:

⁴⁹ See Tzvi Leshem, "Flipping into Ecstasy: Towards a Syncopal Understanding of Mystical Hasidic Somersaults," *Studia Judaica* 17:2014 1(33), pp. 157-183.

But to what shall I commit myself? To learn more? I think that as far as possible, I don't waste any time. To abstain from physical pleasures? If my own desires are not fooling me, thank God, I am not so attached to them. So what am I missing? Simply to be a Jew. I see myself as a self-portrait that shows all colors and features real to life. Just one thing is missing: the soul.

God! Master of the World, Who sees my innermost secrets! Before You I confess. You I beseech! I feel so cast aside and distanced from You and from Your holy Presence! Help me—I want to become a simple Jew!

God! Save me from wasting the rest of my years chasing the illusions of life! Draw me closer and bring me into Your innermost Presence! Bind me to You forever and ever in wealth of spirit and soul!⁵⁰

Piaseczno Hasidism

What is Piaseczno Hasidism? The Rebbe wrote that it is difficult to capture the essence of Hasidism itself, as noted above: "It is impossible to intellectually describe how a true Hasid prays, how his soul becomes inflamed and bound to supernal holiness, or how he sees in the Torah and in the commandments the lovely splendor of God, the world's glory, and he sees a spark of His presence everywhere in the world. It is difficult even for the Hasid himself to comprehend these matters." We may, however, identify at least two major features of Piaseczno Hasidism

⁵⁰ *To Heal the Soul*, 46.

that distinguishes it from other Hasidic schools: the nature of prophecy in modern times, and the meditative technique of visualization.

Prophecy, argued the Rebbe, did not end in the biblical period—it was merely altered. The direct, unmediated, two-way communication with God through the institution of prophecy was attenuated, and in this the Rebbe did not deviate from the traditional theological position of Orthodoxy. The Rebbe contended, however, that God continued to maintain an open broadcast channel, and that with the appropriate spiritual training, Hasidim could receive Divine inspiration, albeit not with the power and clarity of the biblical prophets. The development of this spiritual sensitivity was the primary goal of Piaseczno Hasidism.⁵¹

Among the many exercises used by the Rebbe to foster this prophetic strength was active visualization. Perhaps the most evocative passages in the Rebbe's writings are those in which he leads the reader through the exercise of imagining key moments in Jewish history. The Rebbe urges readers, for example, to picture themselves departing Egypt with the Exodus, or visiting the Temple in Jerusalem. One particularly disturbing exercise is the visualization of one's own death.⁵² Students who follow the mental regimen of these visualizations, argued the Rebbe, would develop their ability to perceive prophetic transmissions. In other places he takes readers into the contemporary period, imagining the onset of the Sabbath

⁵¹ Daniel Reiser, "To Rend the Entire Veil": Prophecy in the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piaseczna and its Renewal in the Twentieth Century, *Modern Judaism* 34, 3 (2014), pp. 334-352, Leshem, "Bein meshihyut."

⁵² *Hakhsharat Ha-Avreikhim*, Ch. 8 (p. 90-100 in undated Feldheim revision of 1961 edition).

and the recital of the Woman of Valor (*Aishet Hayil*) prayer from a Divine viewpoint, simultaneously embracing the totality of Jewish fidelity despite suffering two millennia of exile:

And at this point, I cannot hold myself back any more. My soul sings out to her: *Her children rise and praise her*, and not only we but her husband in the lofty heights lauds her. *Many daughters have accomplished great deeds*—all the souls that God created reveal His glory—but *you have surpassed them all*—because all the others reveal only the shining of His power, while you reveal light whose source is God's self, His knowledge and His holiness. *A God-fearing woman is to be praised*, and therefore, Master of the World, *give to her from the fruit of her hands*—raise her up from the dust, and hurry to save her from her suffering and exile.

Your vision is now not of the downtrodden state of the Jewish people, it is not out of pity that from the depths of your soul the song of *Aishet Hayil* rises up. All you see is greatness, you no longer see the material world at all. The whole world is filled with His glory—that is all that exists. The Shekhinah and all its limbs—the souls of Israel—are at the center, are everything. At this hour, you feel yourself as one of the children of God. The Shekhinah, the Community of Israel, dwells within you—and you within it. You no longer feel merely joy or bliss, but the absorption of your self into the divine, to the degree that your spiritual level will

allow, and purity and ascension beyond your level. Your lot is a happy one, in this world and the next.⁵³

The Third Meal

The Rebbe favored certain times and places for engaging in spiritual work. The Rebbe particularly valued *seudah shelishit*, the third meal of the Sabbath (also known as *shalosh seudos*). Unlike the Friday night dinner and Saturday lunch, eaten at home with family, the third meal is eaten communally in the synagogue by the Rebbe with his male Hasidim. The menu is not elaborate—typically bread and herring—and generally follows a set pattern. After the afternoon prayer, attendees gather around a large table and eat lightly. Several psalms and mystical hymns are sung, and the Rebbe would deliver a short discussion of some Hasidic thought related to the weekly Torah reading. Grace after meals is recited, followed by evening prayers.

In my experience, most contemporary congregations treat the third meal as a minor affair, often an anticlimactic and even disappointing end to the spiritual elevation of the Sabbath. A certain *tristesse* fills the air as the weekday approaches, and the background conversations begin to creep into topics discouraged on the Sabbath: commerce, politics, gossip. Men glance at their watches, anxious to retrieve their smartphones after a 25-hour separation. By contrast, one can only imagine the spiritually exhilarating experience of a Piaseczno *shalosh seudos* in the presence of the Rebbe, who compared the weekly *shalosh seudos* to the

⁵³ *Obligation*, 204-205, translation lightly adapted for consistency.

holiest day in the Jewish calendar: “*Shalosh seudos* time on Shabbat—the weekly Yom Kippur. Just as Yom Kippur reveals the soul and purifies it from a year of alienation, so too does the *Shalosh seudos* bring out the yearnings and anguish of the soul that were hidden throughout the week.”⁵⁴

The Rebbe frequently returned to the subject of *shalosh seudos*, seeing it not only as an opportunity for advancement in holiness but something more elemental: the return of a lost child to a distant parent. This metaphor was deeply meaningful to the Rebbe, who lost his own father at a tragically young age. Although he could not have known his father well, he maintained an awesome dedication to him, soaking himself in his father’s Hasidic writings and citing them frequently in his own.

And even within the Shabbat itself, the special quality of each time keeps changing. The flavor and sight and holiness of Friday night is different from the flavor and sight and holiness of Shabbat day, and the third meal at the conclusion of Shabbat is different again. Just as souls in the Garden of Eden keep ascending, growing stronger, reaching new levels of beauty and holiness, so too does the soul on Shabbat. And during the third meal, as the Shabbat ends, your heart breaks within you as you pray for what your soul and body need—but this heartbreak is not one of sadness or spiritual descent. To the contrary, it is a heartbreak of yearning, the yearning of the child for his father.

⁵⁴ Translations from *Tsav ve-Zeruz* are taken from Yehoshua Starrett’s beautiful work, entitled *To Heal the Soul: The Spiritual Journal of a Chasidic Rebbe* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). This passage is found on page 145.

We can compare this to a prince who has been sent far away from his father and remains bereft of everything. What he really is missing, what he really needs, is to be with his father—but he is so beset by troubles, so oppressed, he is unable to distinguish between all his various miseries and afflictions. A web of misfortunes burdens his heart, his soul is bitter. He returns for a visit to his father's house, sees his father, and suddenly all his worries are forgotten. His troubles melt away and his heart is filled with light, security, and salvation. After a short time, though, realizing he will have to leave soon, he falls into his father's arms and weeps, pours out his heart to his father and cries "Father, it is so hard for me to be so far away from you! My heart becomes closed from all the suffering, and my whole being is surrounded by darkness. I have nothing that I need, not even food and water, and I become so deranged from the complexity of all my troubles that I forget my true nature, I forget that I am the son of a king, and I even forget your holiness, your glory, and your devotion.

True, after having ascended spiritually from level to level throughout the whole Shabbat, it's a shame to waste any of the precious moments of the third meal praying for one's material sustenance. But imagine a child, held in his father's embrace, clinging to him and sobbing. Is such a child capable of hiding anything from his father, holding back any of his worries or fears? When you pour

out your soul, all its cracks and fissures become visible.⁵⁵

In *Tsav ve-Zeruz*, we see that his public writings and his private self were entirely consistent on the redemptive power of *shalosh seudos*:

It amazes me why people don't get as excited about going to the weekly *shalosh seudos* as they do about going to *Kol Nidre*.

It has sometimes happened to me at a *shalosh seudos* that I don't know where I've been until now: I feel as if I have been hidden away somewhere or that I have hidden myself from facing God, and suddenly here I am—standing before Him face-to-face. I feel that God is then looking straight at me, His awareness penetrating right through me. His penetrating vision seems to spot and bear witness to my every blemish.

I am gripped by shame and terror. I would try to hide myself among the crowd of people, maybe under the table, but where can I hide from God? Wherever I hide, there You are. My secret refuge is filled with Your Presence. And when I reach the singing of the Twenty-Third Psalm—I *shall not fear for You are with me*—my tongue freezes and is unable to continue. How dare I leave my shelter of shame to identify with God and say *for You are with me*? I feel at that moment that God is looking

⁵⁵ *Obligation*, 214-215.

upon me with such censuring pity that it eats up my heart and stings my entire body.

And sometimes I am overwhelmed by such a shame that I almost lose all my spirits. I then clearly see my lowly state of being—whatever good points I may have are nothing when experiencing God's Presence. I then feel like a lowly worm that brags about how strong and beautiful its holes in the ground are until it sees the palaces built by humans. What a joke all its underground tunnels are compared to the palaces of humans!⁵⁶

Let us take a moment to reflect, indeed to visualize, what it must have meant to be by the Rebbe's side as the Sabbath drew to a close, the meal eaten and the songs sung, and then, in the gathering dark, listening to the Rebbe speak words of Torah:

Let us take an instance of composed mindfulness: *shalosh seudos*, the third Sabbath meal.

You are sitting at *shalosh seudos*, on the Sabbath in the company of Hasidim. Don't you feel anything? The holy ones say that an hour of *shalosh seudos* is like the hour of which it is said, "Better an hour of repentance and goods deeds in this world than the entire life of the world-to-come" (Berakhot 48a). My holy father-in-law said in the name of the Maggid of Kozienice that *shalosh seudos* has the quality of "the righteous sitting with crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance

⁵⁶ *To Heal the Soul*, 61-62.

of God's Presence" (Pinhas, Zohar 258a). And you don't feel a thing? An experience greater than the world-to-come is passing over you—yet you feel nothing!

No doubt your laziness entices you again, saying, "Stop trying to be what you are not." But I have already told you that this is the response of the evil inclination within you...

No doubt you also feel something at *shalosh seudos*. Your heart and mind are tossing to and fro from the mighty sound of the wheels: the wheels of the divine chariot that are passing through your soul. But you are not able to comprehend and see, and the sound and roar are lost to you, so that you barely realize that the Almighty accompanied by all His host has come.

Everyone has to learn how to see, on his level. During *shalosh seudos*, it is very simple. The Sabbath has passed, a day of holiness. The heavens have been sanctified and you too have sanctified yourself. You haven't involved yourself in business, nor wasted time in idle chatter. You have sat and meditated on your Creator, and with friends you have learned Torah or conversed in matters of holiness. You have cleansed yourself from the week's every stain and speck of dust, and you have made an attempt to become attuned to your soul, as you weren't during the week. At every stage you have felt as if you were elevating yourself from one level of holiness to another, until

you reached *shalosh seudos*, the pinnacle: the desire of desires.

Now you feel that this is neither the time nor place to eat meat and fish, but to search for God, Who hides in the crevices of glory, and to take pleasure in His radiance. You sit with your friends, who also seek God.

And you sit in darkness. This custom of Israel is Torah, because it is fitting that the body reflect the state of the soul at this moment. There are two types of darkness. There is what we see as darkness because it is beyond our ability to sense. From God's perspective, that is true light. And then there is the darkness that comes only from this world.⁵⁷

Neither the world nor its affairs appear any longer. And since for a full twenty-four hours you have distanced yourself from this world and step by step drawn closer to the desire of desires, which is God's will, your mind, soul and the senses of your body force you to physically sit in darkness.

Your heart and eyes no longer see the world or worldly matters. God is hiding in darkness. After searching and examining throughout Shabbat, you have come to the thick cloud where God is. You have sought, and you have found the beloved of your soul. Your soul draws near to God and melts

⁵⁷ It is noteworthy that Congregation Aish Kodesh of Woodmere, NY, led by Rabbi Moshe Weinberger in the model of Piaseczno Hasidut, conducts the Third Meal in darkness.

in God's holiness. The whole room is full of the celestial palace, and you force yourself through this holy palace to the Holy of Holies, your soul longing to enter the innermost chamber to come to the place where God is: to hold God and not let God go.

And if you were to know that you were to remain in this state constantly, then your soul would be joyful with an eternal joy. But you remember that in a minute the lights will be lit, you will make *havdalah*, and again you will fall into the weekday. Your spirit is bitter: how will you fall from the darkness of heaven, the clouds of purity, to the darkness of Egypt, the darkness of suffering: the suffering of the body and the soul together? You tremble and feel, now you feel them both: the end of days and the end of the week, the heights of the peak of holiness and the nadir of the lowliness of the non-holy. These two shades of darkness now wrestle within you at *shalosh seudos*.

This can be compared to the son of a king who was sent away from his father and thrown into prison. At the last moment before he is separated from his father, he draws himself even closer, he pushes forward and comes close, grasps him and embraces him, takes delight in him and yearns for him. In the midst of its delight and fear, the spirit cries out from the depths, *even though I walk*

*through the valley of the shadow of death, I will
not fear evil, for You are with me.*⁵⁸

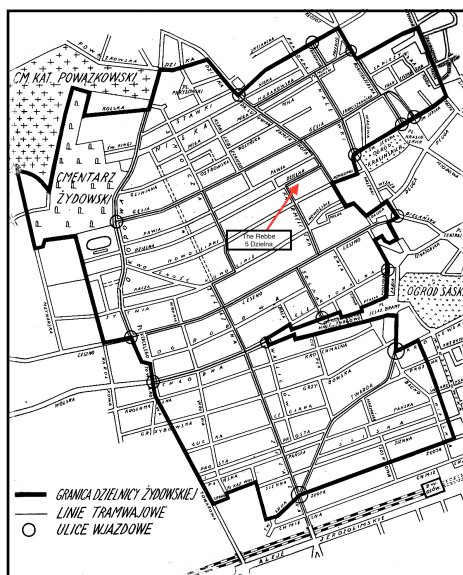
Let us now turn to the Rebbe's writings from the valley of the shadow of death itself.

⁵⁸ Shulman, "Experiencing the Divine," lightly edited for consistency.

Chapter Two

The Prince in Captivity

The Hebrew Year 5700 (1939-40)



*Boundaries of the Warsaw Ghetto and
the Rebbe's Bet Midrash at 5 Dzielna*

The striking originality of the Rebbe's writings are apparent from the very first sermon, delivered on September 14, 1939. In fact, it is almost impossible to compare his work to any other document that survived the Holocaust. While the literature associated with the unfortunate term "Holocaust theology" has grown over the last eight decades, the Rebbe's *Torah from the Years of Wrath* remains *sui generis*: nothing remotely similar has been discovered. It is unlikely that this evaluation of the qualitative uniqueness of his writings will ever change.

True, a broad range of Rabbis authored works, large and small, that address the Holocaust. The most prominent are included in the recent Hebrew scholarly anthology edited by Gershon Greenberg and Asaf Yedidya, entitled *Justice is like the Great Deep: Orthodox Theological Responses to the Holocaust*.¹ Yet even a brief perusal of the fifteen theologians represented in this work demonstrates the unusual status of the Rebbe's writings. Only four of the scholars wrote works related to the Holocaust during the war itself. Works written after the war, while of profound value, are qualitatively distinct because of the inescapable influence of hindsight. Of those four Rabbis who wrote during the war years, only three of them were living under Nazi occupation at the time. Of the three who wrote under Nazi occupation, only two recorded sermons that were communicated to audiences over the duration of the war.²

Basically, only two book-length collections of Rabbinic sermons survived the war: *Torah from the Years of Wrath* by the Rebbe, and the collected sermons of Rabbi Shlomo

¹ *Mishpateha tehom rabah: tagovot hegoyot ortodiksiyot la-sho'ah*, Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 2016.

² Rabbi Yissakhar Shlomo Teikhtal's *Em ha-Banim Semeihah* was written for print dissemination and published by the author in 1943 as a stand-alone volume supporting religious Zionism. Unlike sermons, this work had a single unifying thesis (arguing for support of Zionism) and was composed as a monographic response to the Holocaust as a whole rather than specific, weekly developments during the occupation. For another volume of sermons, delivered in a French camp, see Moshe Kalenberg, *Yedei Moshe: Derashot be-mahaneh hesger be-Tsarfat be-yemei ha-shoah*, ed. E. Farbstein Jerusalem: Michlalah-Jerusalem College, 2005.

Zalman Unsorfer (1888-1944).³ On the surface, the two books have much in common. Both Rabbis maintained a heroically pious posture throughout the war years, defying Nazi prohibitions to deliver weekly messages of encouragement to despairing Jewish audiences—the Rebbe in Warsaw, Rabbi Unsorfer in Bratislava and nearby refugee camps.⁴ Both authors were ultimately martyred during the Holocaust, and their written works were published posthumously.

In one aspect, key to our study, the Rebbe and Rabbi Unsorfer differed radically: the presentation and integration of historical data into their Sabbath sermons. Rabbi Unsorfer took a straightforward, direct approach to addressing the immediate existential concerns of his audience by discussing them explicitly. The historical context is often at the forefront of his talks, both in terms of brief introductions intended for his later readership and also within the body of the message itself. For example, his message for January 3, 1942 is prefaced with this note:

On the eve of the holy Sabbath of *Parashat Vayehi*
5702, a time of great suffering, may the Merciful
One rescue us. This week the home for the aged in

³ Omitted from Greenberg and Yedidya's study of theological responses to the Holocaust is the important work of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry (1914-2003). Imprisoned in the Ghetto of Kaunas, Lithuania, Rabbi Oshry recorded his responses to numerous questions posed to him in Jewish law. After the war he published them in five Hebrew volumes and an abridged English translation (*Responsa from the Holocaust*, eds. B. Goldman and Y. Leiman, New York: Judaica Press, 2001). Religiously and historically significant, Rabbi Oshry's work is nevertheless of an entirely different genre: legal, pragmatic responses to specific conditions of persecution rather than intellectual and spiritual guidance, hence the omission from Greenberg and Yedidya's work.

⁴ Gershon Greenberg, "The Suffering of the Righteous according to Shlomo Zalman Unsorfer of Bratislava, 1939-1944," in John K. Roth et al., eds., *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, 422-438.

Patronka was burned to the ground. The elderly residents fled in fear to the dining room, and it is possible that the righteous daughter of Rabbi Zalman Shpitser was killed, may God avenge her blood. Also, the wicked ones, may their names be blotted out, entered the synagogues and beat the Jews, pure of heart, who were in the midst of prayer, may God have mercy.⁵

Rabbi Unsendorfer's sermon begins with an explicit statement of grief, and continues with an account of the prior suffering of his community, even down to the detailed level of specific restrictions on the amount of money the Jews could withdraw from their bank accounts. The message is couched in the traditional context of the weekly Torah reading, but the bulk of the sermon focuses on giving voice to the persecutions endured by the Jews of Bratislava and the surrounding refugee camps, culminating in the horrific condition of the elderly Jews of Patronka.⁶

By contrast, the Rebbe's approach, with a few notable exceptions, never made explicit reference to specific historical events in the Ghetto. This is not to say that the Rebbe turned a blind eye to the suffering of his congregation—nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, the Rebbe adopted a literary style that approached the core concerns of his audience from an oblique angle, artfully couching his message in the discussion of the weekly Torah reading. This rhetorical method, sometimes called Aesopian language for its allegorical nature, served several purposes.

⁵ Greenberg and Yedidya, *Mishpatekha*, 81.

⁶ Greenberg and Yedidya, *Mishpatekha*, 81-87.

Many Warsaw diarists employed some version of coded language, fearing reprisals if their documents were discovered. Typically such devices—referring to Nazis as “others” or disguising records as personal correspondence to fictional relatives—disappeared as the war progressed. Writers soon learned that life was cheap to the occupying powers, and they cared little what Ghetto dwellers wrote: random violence could ensue for far more minor infractions. Aesopian language also allowed the Rebbe to remain compliant with Jewish law, which forbids public signs of mourning on the Sabbath. Not only are eulogies prohibited on the holy seventh day, even discussions of mundane matters such as commerce are forbidden.⁷

Aesopian language allowed the Rebbe to convey his central message in an artfully indirect manner that was often more powerful than a straightforward exhortation. The Rebbe’s sophisticated veiling of contemporary realia within the weekly scriptural reading removed the fundamental axis of history from the Ghetto and placed it within the Torah instead. His literary style reinforced the message, week after week, that the answer to the existential questions posed by the Holocaust lay not within the pages of the ghetto press, not in the rumors circulating throughout the Ghetto, but within the text of the weekly Torah portion and the teachings of the Sages. This approach also allowed the Rebbe to construct his remarks for an audience beyond 5 Dzielna: it is clear that the Rebbe believed that the Torah’s message transcended the time and place of the Warsaw Ghetto, and framed his marks with a view to future readers.⁸

⁷ See Isaiah 58:13, codified into Jewish law in *Shulhan Arukh* Orach Hayim 246. The Rebbe refers to this concept of Sabbath speech restrictions, see *Derashot* 1:96.

⁸ I am grateful to Dean Stanley Boylan for this observation.

Tishrei 5700 (September 14–October 13)

The first sermon is a formal Rosh Hashanah address. Unlike the vast majority of entries, delivered in the more intimate setting of the afternoon *shalosh seudos* meal, the Rosh Hashanah sermon was probably delivered from the pulpit on the morning of the holiday. It is likely that the audience was smaller than earlier years, given the air raids that blanketed Warsaw shortly after the beginning of the war on September 1, but the annual Rosh Hashanah *drashah* remained one of most important public addresses of the liturgical year. At 1800 words it is indeed much longer than almost all entries in his wartime writings, but under such conditions it is remarkable that the Rebbe spoke at all.

The primary value of the sermon is its theological message, but the full import of the Rebbe's words cannot be grasped without an awareness of the immediate historical context of its presentation. As we mentioned above, Jewish law frowns upon the discussion of sad or distressing news on the Sabbath or holidays, preventing the Rebbe from referring openly to the terror without—even though that was precisely the burning issue on the mind of everyone in the audience. With a handful of notable exceptions, the Rebbe never deviated from this pious and heroic literary practice.

Let us therefore put ourselves into the *bet midrash* on 5 Dzielna street with the Rebbe on Thursday, September 14, 1939, the first day of Rosh Hashanah of the Hebrew year 5700. Two weeks earlier, Germany attacked the western border, toppling the nearby major city of Cześćochowa within two days. Warsaw hurriedly prepared its defenses, but the Luftwaffe dominated the skies, bombing at will. All

Varsovians, Polish and Jewish alike, were called to mobilize for work and self-defense duties. By September 7 a mass flight of Warsaw's citizens to the east ensued. Many leading citizens fled, including the Polish government and its commander-in-chief. Prominent figures in the rabbinic establishment also left the city, correctly fearing that they would be singled out for special abuse from the Nazis. Notably, the Rebbe refused to join this exodus, and in fact refused all future offers to be taken to safety if it meant separation from his Hasidim.⁹ He did not, however, insist that his followers remain within the city. Aviva Kerwasser Sadan, a survivor of the Ghetto, recorded the Rebbe's advice to her father in her memoirs:

Papa returns from the house of the Piaseczno Rebbe after evening prayers with a sad face...he gathers us, the daughters, around him and says, 'Difficult days are approaching for the Jews of Warsaw. According to the Rebbe's advice you must escape from the ghetto as soon as possible. All your lives you girls have been faithful to the Torah and the commandments, but from this moment on you are exempt from this. In the name of Heaven you are commanded in relation to one thing alone: to save your lives...after the storm has passed, come home.'"¹⁰

⁹ See Havi Dreifus, "The Work of My Hands is Drowning in the Sea, and You Would Offer Me Song?!: Orthodox Behavior and Leadership in Warsaw during the Holocaust," in *Warsaw: The Jewish Metropolis, Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky*, eds. Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet, Leiden: Brill, 2015, p. 479 note 36. The Rebbe even refused to be spirited out of the Trawniki labor camp unless the rescue included a large number of fellow prisoners. This mutual rescue pact will be discussed in Chapter Five.

¹⁰ Aviva Kerwasser Sadan, *Lihiyot al kav ha-kets* (Kiryat Hayim, 1995), 210, cited in Dreifus, "Work of my Hands," 491 note 72. Transliteration has been adapted slightly for consistency.

The Nazis reached Warsaw on Friday, September 8. They did not immediately enter the city, but brutalized it with mortar and artillery fire and punishing air strikes. After a week of sheltering in cellars for fear of the Angel of Death death dropping from the skies, the Jews of Warsaw cautiously prepared to greet the new year 5700.

The Rebbe's message for Rosh Hashanah, like all his sermons, was delivered in the vernacular Yiddish but recorded later in Rabbinic Hebrew, the literary standard.¹¹ The manuscript shows evidence of editing—as per the Rebbe's documented prewar practice, he wrote the original in his own hand and gave it to a scribe for copying and later annotation.¹² Most of the earliest sermons are preserved in this format. The existence of annotations indicate that the Rebbe clearly intended his text for publication. We can only surmise how the Rebbe, known as a powerful public speaker, would have expanded on the core concepts. Reading the text aloud in Hebrew at a moderate pace requires just over fifteen minutes, but a typical Rosh Hashanah sermon in Yiddish might last thirty to sixty minutes, possibly even longer. Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, one of the premier expositors of Piaseczno Hasidism, took nearly two full hours to deliver this sermon in English in a classroom setting.¹³

¹¹ See Reiser, "Ha-derashah he-Hasidit."

¹² See Reiser's introduction to the first volume of *Derashot* for a reconstruction of the Rebbe's editorial process, esp. pp. 54-61.

¹³ Audio versions of Rabbi Moshe Weinberger's study of this are available at [yutorah.org](http://www.yutorah.org). Rosh Hashanah 5700 is discussed in <http://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/840172/rabbi-moshe-weinberger/sefer-aish-kodesh-1-true-fear-of-hashem/> and <http://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/840476/rabbi-moshe-weinberger/sefer-aish-kodesh-2-our-crying-expresses-hashem-s-presence/>. Accessed August 29, 2017.

The Rebbe began by citing a Midrash (*Kohelet* 9) that alludes to the three fasts of Tishrei: the fast of the eve of Rosh Hashanah, generally only observed by the very pious,¹⁴ the Fast of Gedalyah, which occurs immediately after Rosh Hashanah and is observed by most Orthodox Jews, and the fast of Yom Kippur, more universally maintained:

A city owed taxes to the king, and he sent out collectors. When the tax collectors approached within ten *mil* of the city, the local dignitaries went out and paid homage to the king, and the collectors waived a third of the taxes. [At a distance of 5 *mil*, the middle-level authorities went out and paid homage to the king, and the collectors waived another third. When they drew close to the city, men, women and children came out and paid homage to the king, and the collectors waived the remaining third.]

So too on the eve of Rosh Hashanah the great ones of the generation fast, and the Holy One who is Blessed waives a third of their sins...until the day of Yom Kippur and the Holy One who is Blessed forgives them all.¹⁵

The text of the sermon omits a significant amount of the text of this lesser-known Midrash, as well as information the Rebbe would certainly have included in his oral explanation of the Midrash: specifically, the analogy of the three approaches of the collectors to the three fasts of the

¹⁴ See Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayim 581:2.

¹⁵ *Derashot* 1:83.

eve of a Rosh Hashanah, the Fast of Gedalyah, and the Fast of Yom Kippur. This omission is probably indicative of the Rebbe's intent to review the material for eventual publication, and not an exact reproduction of the words he used to deliver the sermon orally. The sense of his message, and in particular the connection between the advance of the German army and its meaning for the High Holy Days, is clear.

Certainly the Rebbe's audience must have been perturbed by the presence of the German invader, camped outside the defenseless, leaderless city. When would they enter, and what would their incursion mean for the Jews? The Rebbe, mindful of their obvious concern, opened with a Midrashic source that evoked the contemporary political moment, absorbing and even co-opting the audience's fear into his message. The obvious similarities between the Jews of the Midrash, anxious about the tax collectors of the king outside city gates, and the presence of the Wehrmacht looming outside Warsaw, allowed the Rebbe to capitalize on the emotive moment and provide Torah guidance. The Rebbe's message captured his follower's fears and placed them within the cosmic, timeless ecosystem of the Midrash. Fear formed the core of his message that Rosh Hashanah, and he described it as an encouraging symptom of spiritual health, not weakness:

The essence of fear is derived from the greatness of God. Every Jewish soul feels this, each person according to his ability. Thus, whereas one person might feel within himself the fear of the greatness and holiness of God, and tremble with the thought,

Heaven forbid, of sinning against God, another person might merely feel the fear of punishment.¹⁶

The Rebbe then introduced a parable that, in various forms, permeates much of his written *oeuvre*: the plight of the prince in captivity, yearning to be reunited with his father the king. It is especially poignant the the Rebbe himself was orphaned as a toddler, and his relationship with his father could be best described as literary in nature. His citation of a version of the parable, recorded in his father's work *Imrei Elimelekh*, carried an irony that resonated with the gravitas of the moment.

A parable: A prince is held captive among wanton people who torment him, when he suddenly senses that the king is close by. He begins to shriek bitterly, "save me, my father! Save me, my king!" He cries because he senses that the king is near. The intensification of his plaintive cries is an indication of the king's greater proximity. So too when a Jew is broken-hearted, whether over his own troubles, the suffering of his loved ones, or for Jewry as a whole, is a sign that he senses the revelation of the sovereignty of Heaven. All this, however, is dependent on the intensification of his fear of the Blessed One, and his repentant desire to coronate the Blessed One as his King.¹⁷

The Rebbe argued that fear should be embraced as a sign that a person recognizes the proximity of God on Rosh Hashanah. A Hasid cannot sink into desperation, but he or

¹⁶ *Derashot* 1:83.

¹⁷ *Derashot* 1:84-85.

she can give voice to fear in prayer and the sound of the shofar. The Rebbe did not argue, as he did in other contexts, that fear should be ignored. On the contrary: properly channeled, the fear itself is the vehicle for salvation. The trepidation caused by the advance of the Nazis was, in itself, a spiritual lever by which the Jews could propel their closeness to God. In so doing, they would—like the Jews of the Midrash, fearing the tax collectors—bring about their own redemption.

The Rebbe's messages for Rosh Hashanah and the following Sabbath echo themes that are characteristic of his prewar works: the call to repentance, urging Hasidim to abandon faddish ideologies and return to the traditional observance of their ancestors. The eve of Yom Kippur, however, witnessed an especially punishing Luftwaffe bombardment. This was not a coincidence—the Nazis were diabolically fond of choosing auspicious dates in the Jewish calendar for new *aktionen*. An estimated 60,000 citizens of Warsaw lost their lives in the bombardment that began on September 22, 1939. The Rebbe's message was crafted to address the grieving survivors. Implicit in his words is a broad definition of who receives the designation of a martyr (that is, one who dies *al kidush Hashem*, in sanctification of the Name of God) to include, presumably, those Jews who were killed in the bombing raids:

The holy book *Arvei Nahal*, *Parshas Masai*, discusses an oral tradition from a responsum from the *Maharam*,¹⁸ stating that a person who is martyred does not feel any pain whatsoever.¹⁹ The author of *Arvei Nahal* explains that this is because

¹⁸ Rabbi Meir ben Barukh of Rottenberg, 1220-1293.

¹⁹ Rabbi David Shlomo Eibeschetz, *Arvei Nahal*, Parashat Masei, s.v. "Biarti."

the martyr is set ablaze with such an intense desire to be martyred for sanctifying the Divine Name that he elevates all his senses to the world of pure intellect, such that his entire being is clothed in intellect, and all his senses, sensations, and physicality are stripped from him. Thus he feels only pleasure.

This is also the case with all the trials that a Jew endures—the trials are indeed difficult, and God should have mercy and remove them from us. When a person elevates them to the level of intellect, however, understanding them as a means to purge his sins and to purify himself to draw closer to God, then the more strongly he attaches himself to this thought, the lighter the difficulties become, and easier for him to bear.²⁰

Until this point, the Rebbe's message of consolation, his appeal for strength and renewed commitment to Jewish spirituality, are well understood as conventional expressions of pastoral sentiment. The survivors might receive comfort from the notion that their loved ones, as martyrs, felt no pain in their last moments. Within days, however, tragedy struck the Rebbe in the most personal of ways, and he was forced to confront the suffering of his Hasidim in an immediate manner, within his own family.

The bombing assault continued, and on the morning of September 25, two days after Yom Kippur, a shell fragment flew through a window and grievously wounded the Rebbe's only son, Ben Tsion Elimelekh. The Rebbe and

²⁰ *Derashot*, 1:89. The 1960 and 2007 editions of *Aish Kodesh* incorrectly include this passage as part of the previous entry for Shabbat Teshuvah.

some of his followers carried him through a fusillade of bombs from one hospital to another, desperate to secure medical treatment for the young man, bleeding profusely from the injury. He was eventually admitted to a hospital, leaving his wife, father, and his sister-in-law outside at the entrance, reciting Psalms for his recovery throughout that terrible night. As morning broke, the Rebbe left them to go to the private home of a doctor to seek his assistance. While he was away, Nazi planes disgorged another deadly load immediately over the hospital entrance, killing the Rebbe's sister-in-law Hannah Hasten and his daughter-in-law Gitl. His son died of his wounds four days later. A contemporary account, published in the American Yiddish paper *Der Forverts*, describes the Rebbe's reaction:

For a time, the hasidim who were with the Rebbe thought he would collapse, though this lasted only a moment. The Rebbe composed himself, recited the verse, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away..." (Job 1:21), and directed that the deceased be taken to the cemetery for a eulogy and burial.²¹

The Rebbe was silent for a month. No entries for the weeks after the death of his son are recorded in *Torah from the Years of Wrath*. The Rebbe did, however, record his anguish in *Tsav Ve-Zeruz*, his personal spiritual journal, which also survived the war.

Now I sit still and silent. The intensity of pain is beyond bearing—I am broken beyond repair...it was decreed in Heaven a harsh decree, a very

²¹ The full account, originally published in the March 30, 1940 issue (p.8), is translated in Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994, 8-9. The translation presented here is adapted from Dr. Polen's fluid style.

bitter one, to take him from me in 5700 at the outbreak of the war. On the 12th of Tishrei, during the bombing, he was mortally wounded—he was standing near me. A few days later, on the second day of Sukkot, the 16th of Tishrei, he returned his pure and holy soul to his Maker.

Also at that time, my daughter-in-law, his wife, was killed while standing outside the hospital. That was on the 13th of Tishrei. Her name was Gittel, daughter of Rabbi Shlomo Hayim of Balikov. All hope for myself and my soul both in this world and the next was aborted with their premature deaths. And my own future in them through their continued spiritual growth was also destroyed for me. The tragedy is too great to bear—only You, God, can sustain and encourage me with Your wonders...

Please, God, have pity on a poor Jew like me. Have mercy on me, Father and Master! Listen to the petition of my heart, which wallows in pain and sorrow.²²

Heshvan 5700 (October 14-November 12)

No entries were recorded in *Torah from the Years of Wrath* for six weeks. Then, on November 4, the Rebbe broke his public silence with a sermon on the weekly Torah reading of Haya Sarah, which begins with the death of the matriarch Sarah.

²² *To Heal the Soul*, 116-117.

It is written in the holy work *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, at the beginning of Parashat Va'era, in the name of the holy rabbi, the man of God, our teacher and master, Menahem Mendel of Rimanov (may the memory of the righteous and holy be for a blessing), regarding the Talmudic passage: a covenant is made with salt, and a covenant is made with afflictions. Just as salt makes meat palatable, so too afflictions purify the individual of sin:²³ "Just as one cannot derive pleasure from meat that has been excessively salted, rather only if it was properly salted, so too afflictions should be meted out only in such measure that they can be tolerated, and with an admixture of mercy."

Rashi explains that "the death of Sarah was juxtaposed to the binding of Yitzhak because with the news that her son was being bound and was about to be sacrificed, her soul burst forth from her and she died."²⁴ That is to say, Moshe our Teacher, the faithful shepherd, juxtaposed the death of Sarah to the binding of Yitzhak in order to advocate for us, indicating what results from excessive afflictions, Heaven forbid—her soul burst forth.

Furthermore, if this was the case with the tremendously righteous Sarah, who was as blameless at the age of 100 as a twenty-year-old, and all of her years were equally good, yet despite

²³ Berakhot 5a.

²⁴ See Rashi's comment on Genesis 23:2.

this she was unable to withstand such horrible afflictions—how much the more so does this apply to us.²⁵

The message is challenging on a theological plane, and exemplary of the electric quality that pervades the Rebbe's writings. Here, the Rebbe poetically argued that Moses, as original scribe and thus a kind of editor of the Torah, intentionally placed the reference to Sarah's death immediately after the narrative of the binding of her son Isaac in order to deliver a human message to the Divine: too much suffering can break a person.

On its own, this brief sermon is incredibly potent, a startling illustration of Menahem Mendel of Rimanov's Hasidic teaching. The historical context, however, renders the passage absolutely terrifying—these are the first words that the Rebbe uttered publicly since the deaths of his son, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law. One can only imagine the tension in the room as he delivered this *derashah*: “afflictions should be meted out only in such measure that they can be tolerated, and with an admixture of mercy.” He couched his veiled message—really, a personal communication between the Rebbe and his God—within the Biblical and Midrashic narrative of Sarah's death. Openly expressing his anguish and grief would have been inappropriate, but the Aesopian rereading of a story well known to his audience placed his personal pain in communal context.

At some point later in the war, perhaps as late as January 1943, the Rebbe added a marginal notation to this entry:

²⁵ *Derashot* 1:90-91.

It is also possible to argue that Sarah the Matriarch, who was so heartbroken with binding of Yitzhak that her soul burst forth, did so for the benefit of the Jewish people, to demonstrate to God how it is impossible for the Jewish people to tolerate excessive afflictions. Even for one who remains alive after such afflictions by the grace of God, nevertheless some of his strength—his mind and spirit—are broken and destroyed. Is there a difference between partial and total death?²⁶

A problem is resolved by the verse *the years of the life of Sarah*.²⁷ It seems that Sarah may have sinned by forsaking the remaining years of her life, had she not chosen to be so heartbroken over the binding of Yitzhak. Since, however, she forsook them for the benefit of the Jewish people, the verse subtly indicates *the years of the life of Sarah*. That is to say, that even those years beyond her 127 would have been equally good—even forsaking them did not constitute a sin on her part.²⁸

In this notation, the Rebbe pushed the theologically challenging material even further, arguing that Moses was not the only biblical figure to protest excessive suffering—Sarah, by allowing herself to die with the shock of the

²⁶ Cf. *Hulin* 35b.

²⁷ Genesis 23:1.

²⁸ See *Derashot* II:44-45. Note that this and the following sermons (*Toledot*, *Vayetse*) were included in the sheaf of manuscript pages out of sequence. This is also the first page written entirely in the Rebbe's own hand. This may indicate that the Rebbe had held these entries back from the scribe, perhaps considering whether or not to include them in the selections for later publication.

news of Isaac's experience, was also issuing the ultimate statement of dissent, and that "she did this for the benefit of the Jewish people." At the same time, the Rebbe clearly wished to distance Sarah from any culpability for her choice, allowing herself to be "so heartbroken," perhaps in recognition of those in the Ghetto who could no longer bear a level of suffering that is beyond our comprehension. It is difficult not to read an autobiographical perspective in this sermon—was the Rebbe not expressing a tiny part of his own ineffable anguish? The sermon concluded with a brief prayer: "Thus may God have mercy on us and all Israel and speedily redeem us, spiritually and physically, with revealed acts of lovingkindness."²⁹

The connection between historical events in the Ghetto and the Rebbe's sermons is most explicit in his entry for *Parashat Toledot*, which follows immediately after *Haye Sarah*. The use of Aesopian language is evident, with one noted exception: in a rare moment of transparency, the Rebbe suspends his euphemistic terminology and refers explicitly to the Nazi invaders with the third-person plural pronoun. He does not dignify them with a proper noun—they are not called Nazis or Germans—but this is the closest he will come to naming them in all of *Torah from the Years of Wrath*.

The historical antecedent of the sermon was the Nazi practice of humiliating Warsaw Jews by forcibly shaving their beards, a brutality that occurred with regularity after the city formally capitulated and German soldiers entered on October 1. Rabbi Shimon Huberband provides personal

²⁹ For a powerful extended reading of the theological and philosophical import of this entry, see Don Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy, Hasidic Mysticism and 'Useless Suffering' in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Harvard Theological Review* 101:3-4, pp. 465-505.

testimony to this widespread phenomenon in the initial weeks of the occupation.

Two other Jews were seized along with us; one with a black beard, the other with a long yellowish beard. A moment later, they grabbed an elegantly dressed young lady and forced her to shear off my beard and Shtayer's. The girl wept as she cut our hair, for the honor of the Jewish people which was being disgraced in public by the evil ones...

These barbarities were done not only to grown men, but also to children with earlocks. In Praga, a group of German officers chanced upon the ten-year-old Avrom Igelnik, at the gate of 32 Brukowa Street. They took him away to their headquarters, where they set fire to his earlocks. The young boy was lucky to have been left alive.³⁰

The Rebbe responded with a sermon that meditated on a verse in Isaiah (27:13):

And then they will come, those who are lost in the land of Assyria, and those who are dispersed in the land of Egypt. There are two distinct categories, the lost and the dispersed. The dispersed refers to one who is displaced to a distant locale, yet remains distinct and recognizable. This is in contradistinction to the lost—this person is lost, and is neither distinct nor recognizable. For when the hardships are presently so compounded that

³⁰ Shimon Huberband, *Kiddush Hashem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life during the Holocaust* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1987), 190-191.

they even cut off the beards of Jews which make them outwardly unrecognizable—and due to unimaginable persecution and unbearable afflictions, they are no longer recognizable internally—such a person loses himself, he ceases to recognize himself.³¹ How did he feel a year ago, on the Sabbath, or on a weekday prior to prayers, or during prayers, etc.? Now he is trampled and crushed, such that he no longer senses if he is a Jew or not, or a human being or not, or an animal which has no capacity to feel. This is the nature of one who is lost, yet *they will come, those who are lost*.³²

One may imagine the impact of these words on his audience, which likely included individuals whose beards and side locks were shorn by the Nazis. Marshaling his keen psychological insight, the Rebbe empathized with the victims and affirmed the deep connection between the external markers of identity and one's internal state: "he ceases to recognize himself." The Rebbe concludes with a message of encouragement:

The Talmud states that the one who lost something seeks after his lost object.³³ When he lost it, it was no longer perceptible nor recognizable, and thus the owner seeks to find it, to pick it up and bring it home. And is it not God who is the master of we

³¹ Here the Rebbe added a parenthetical translation in Yiddish: ער פערלירט זיך, "he loses himself." The Rebbe may have used this diglossia because the equivalent Hebrew phrase אובד את עצמו may also be translated as "he commits suicide." The Yiddish phrase clarifies the Rebbe's intent.

³² *Derashot* I:92-93.

³³ See Kidushin 2b, which is in turn an allusion to Adam seeking Eve, his "lost" rib.

who are lost? Are we not the lost possessions of God?...May the Owner of the lost return to find us...³⁴

Kislev 5700 (November 13-December 12)

Within the first week of the occupation the Nazis destroyed the existing Jewish communal infrastructure. Adam Czerniaków, a tragic figure whose detailed yet strangely mundane journal provides extensive information on both the implementation of Nazi policy in the ghetto as well as a daily weather report, was appointed President of the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council).³⁵ By the end of October, the *Judenrat* had completed its first major task at the command of the Nazi overlords: a census of the 359,827 Jews living in Warsaw, just over twenty-eight percent of the city. Upon orders from Himmler, a massive relocation of Jews from surrounding areas began in November that would swell the population with an additional 90,000 refugees. Other decrees from those first weeks included a ban on kosher animal slaughter and forced labor for Jewish boys and men aged 14 and older (later the minimum age was reduced to twelve).³⁶

An early and abortive attempt at creating a formal Ghetto panicked much of the Jewish community. On November 4, the SS hastily convened a meeting of the *Judenrat*. Given that it was the Sabbath, the formal membership could not be readily assembled, but the Nazis were sticklers for protocol, so passersby were brought in to make up the

³⁴ *Derashot* I:93.

³⁵ *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*, ed. Raul Hilberg, Stanislaw Staron and Josef Kermisz, Chicago: Elephant/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1999.

³⁶ Engelking and Leociak, *Warsaw Ghetto*, 37.

quorum. Upon orders of the military command, Jews were to be concentrated within a vaguely defined region of the city, imprecisely laid out on maps that conflicted each other. To enforce compliance, the Nazis seized twenty-four Jewish hostages. On Sunday November 5, Czerniaków led a delegation to the military authorities to plead against the decree. They were received by General Karl von Neumann-Neurode, who seemed genuinely puzzled by the affair, insisting at first that he issued no such order. After consulting with the Gestapo, he confirmed the validity of his decree, but indicated that he had no intention of carrying it out in this manner. The establishment of the ghetto was temporarily stayed, and on Friday, November 10, the hostages were released.³⁷ The Jews of Warsaw received a reprieve but the entire affair unsettled them deeply. To make the general panic worse, the Jews suffered from a lack of reliable information about the course of the war. The independent press was abolished, all radio receivers were confiscated, and rumor rushed in to fill the vacuum.³⁸

The Rebbe's comments reflect the general sense of unease of the period. Meditating on Jacob's dream of the ladder extending heavenward (Genesis 28), he referenced a Midrash that described the angels ascending and descending the ladder as representatives of the nations of the earth:

The following interpretation is possible. There is a well-known Midrashic teaching which states that the angels who were ascending and descending

³⁷ Czerniaków, *Diary*, 88.

³⁸ See Robert Moses Shapiro, ed., *Why Didn't the Press Shout? American & International Journalism During the Holocaust*, NY: Yeshiva University Press, 2003.

the ladder were in fact the ministering angels of the nations of the world.³⁹ Consequently, when hostilities erupt between these ministering angels, this one ascends and casts the other down, and vice versa, under such circumstances the Jew needs Divine mercy to such an extent that it is necessary for God to stand over him and protect him. This is because an angel *will not forgive your sin*,⁴⁰ whereas the Blessed One is endlessly merciful.⁴¹

In other words, the Rebbe offered a steadying hand to the confusing turbulence of rumor-filled Warsaw. The Jews need not distress themselves with the daily ebb and flow of events and rumors, the wake left by the passage of the ministering angels of the various nations of the world. The Almighty was personally watching over them, and like Jacob at the foot of the ladder, they need not fear.

The second half of November 1939 was marked by rapid change in the ghetto. Secondary schools were closed, Jewish-owned businesses were seized, and barbed wire was installed at several entrances to the Jewish quarter. Refugees from other regions began to appear in Warsaw, many of them wearing mandatory Jewish badges imposed elsewhere. At the end of the month, the Star of David was imposed on Warsaw Jewry as well.⁴² Most of these developments, however, were overshadowed by the tragedy of 9 Nalewki Street.

³⁹ Bereshit Rabah 68:14.

⁴⁰ Exodus 23:21.

⁴¹ *Derashot* I:93-94.

⁴² Engelking, *Warsaw Ghetto*, 55.

On November 13, a Polish policeman was shot by a Jew, who fled the scene by running into the courtyard of 9 Nalewki Street, some 500 meters away from the Rebbe's home at 5 Dzielna. Acting on the principle of collective punishment, the Gestapo arrested fifty-three Jewish men living at the apartment block where the shooting occurred and demanded a ransom of 300,000 zloty for their release. Czerniaków and the *Judenrat* hastily collected the money and paid, but the hostages were not released. On November 30, the Nazis informed Czerniaków that all fifty-three men were shot.⁴³

Chaim Kaplan, an astute observer of ghetto life, recorded his reaction in his diary. He was apparently unaware of the efforts of the *Judenrat* to secure the release of the residents of 9 Nalewki, despite the fact that his home was also within walking distance. He recorded the widespread belief that "there is a rumor that the *Judenrat* is partly to blame for this terrible incident. If so, it is a crime that cannot be forgiven."⁴⁴

Kaplan eventually exonerated the *Judenrat* in his diary entry of December 5. His initial reaction to remain silent, however, was echoed in the Rebbe's sermon that week. The Rebbe's expansive discussion of the value of silence, especially on the Sabbath, proclaims the value of refraining from endless theorizing about the turn of events of daily life in the Ghetto. In his diary, Kaplan privately advocated silence regarding the 9 Nalewki affair as a "wait and see" approach, reserving judgment until the unknown role of the *Judenrat* was clarified. The Rebbe's response, ironically,

⁴³ Gutman, *Jews of Warsaw*, 32-33.

⁴⁴ Chaim Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan* ed. Abraham I. Katsch Bloomington: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Indiana University Press, 1999, 80.

also treated the theme of silence. Speaking to an audience stunned by the brutality of the murders, he urged his followers to adopt a posture of silence as a form of Divine worship.

The righteous experience such great spiritual elevation on the holy Sabbath that they become unable to articulate that which they sense and perceive...This is the distinction between being silent and being mute. Generally, the word "silence" is used when there is much to be said but nevertheless one does not speak, as in the verses *if you will be silent at this time*⁴⁵ and *you be silent*,⁴⁶ and so on. These verses refer to situations in which people could have spoken but refrained from doing so. Such is not the case when a Jew is so broken and downtrodden, Heaven forbid, that he cannot say anything—he neither senses nor perceives, having neither the mind nor the heart to sense or perceive. This is not "silence," rather "muteness," like a mute who has no capacity of speech.

Nevertheless, when a Jew sees that he must experience, Heaven forbid, a time of distress in a diminished, broken state, then he strengthens himself and adapts to this time of distress until the wrath passes. He says to himself, "though I am now mute, nevertheless even a mute can communicate to some extent with his gestures—

⁴⁵ Esther 4:14.

⁴⁶ Exodus 14:14.

and so too will I speak to some extent, gesturing in my muteness."⁴⁷

The Rebbe's message was delivered to listeners who had not yet accepted the reality of the Nazi occupation: Warsaw was no longer the capital city of a *Rechtstaat*, a state governed by the rule of law. Prewar Poland had its flaws, to be sure, including a disturbing tendency toward militarism and intolerance, but it remained fundamentally a democracy. Jewish political parties, including Orthodox groups such as Agudat Yisrael, organized and participated in the electoral process. The audacious disregard for due process demonstrated by the arbitrary executions of the inhabitants of 9 Nalewki dramatically illustrated the capricious nature of the German conquerors, and gave the lie to the notion that the *Judenrat* might reason with the conquerors. Speech, the traditional defense of the Jewish minority, was no longer viable. The Rebbe, recognizing this new state of affairs, refused to give in to despair. In the wake of the 9 Nalewki massacre, the Rebbe signaled to his Hasidim a theological posture of protest through silence, directing anguish into prayer and Torah study.⁴⁸

Tevet 5700 (December 13- January 11)

Warsaw Jewry was electrified in early December by a remarkable news item, well-publicized in the official Nazi propaganda organs circulating in the ghetto. At this early point in the war, Germany had not yet violated the secret non-aggression pact signed with the Soviet Union in

⁴⁷ *Derashot* I:96-97.

⁴⁸ See Polen, *Holy Fire*, for an extended theological discussion of this passage.

August 1939. In December, the irony of this political alliance was on display as Nazi-occupied Warsaw welcomed a distinguished guest from the Soviet leadership: the Jewish diplomat Maxim Litvinov (1876-1951). Warsaw Jewry was abuzz with the meaning of this official visit. Unfounded speculations that Litvinov might provide some relief for his suffering coreligionists artificially buoyed the hopes of Warsaw Jewry.⁴⁹

The Rebbe's sermon on *Mikets* (December 9, 1939) responded with a veiled cautionary message for those who held misplaced hopes associated with Litvinov's visit. The true hope of the Jews, the Rebbe maintained, was in the Almighty alone. His sermon began by discussing Jacob's blessing to his sons on the eve of their return to Joseph's court in Egypt. At this point in the biblical narrative, the patriarch Jacob and his sons were unaware of Joseph's true identity, thinking he was simply another Egyptian despot. The parallel to Litvinov was striking: was he, like Joseph, secretly an ally to the Jewish people? Would he use his elevated position to help them in their distress? The Rebbe meditated on Jacob's blessing to his sons:

Is it possible that Jacob the Patriarch would provide them with the blessing that the man that he thought was an Egyptian should have mercy on them? Why didn't he give them a blessing that the man should have no ability to harm them, and that God have mercy on them and save them?

...God created the universe in such a way that it is governed by the laws of cause and effect, the laws of nature, and therefore there are times when

⁴⁹ See Kaplan, *Scroll*, 84.

events must continue to unfold over a protracted period of time until their positive resolution, and thus God's Sovereignty is made manifest. For example, when God cures a sick person, God's salvation and blessed Kingdom are revealed. As the salvation of healing is clothed in causality—it is brought about by means of a particular medicine, by means of a particular doctor, who has to arrive, and who has to get the medicine—this process requires a certain amount of time. When, however, the patient is so endangered, Heaven forbid, that he could not survive such an extended process, then the Holy One who is Blessed says, "enough with the process of the unfolding of events! May he be saved immediately, and thereby make manifest the Kingdom of Heaven."

This is the case with other acts of salvation. When the Jewish people can no longer withstand their sufferings until such time one power conquers or another power is victorious, then the Holy One says "enough with the process!" and immediately they are saved.

...Jacob the Patriarch saw that his salvation must come about through "the man." Since the hardships had become unbearable, however, he said, *may God provide you with mercy before the man*,⁵⁰ that is, that God should provide you with

⁵⁰ Genesis 43:14.

mercy "before" the man shows mercy; may God have mercy and save you.⁵¹

The Rebbe dampened expectations of Litvinov's visit by emphasizing the possibility of relief through political process and expediency. At the same time, he provided hope through conventional Jewish theology, and urged his followers to rely on Divine mercy elicited by prayer.

Shevat 5700 (January 11-February 9)

The Rebbe's entry for *Parashat Bo* (January 13, 1940) is unusual. Recorded in the scribe's careful hand, with minimal annotation, it has two bold diagonal lines drawn through the center of the text, indicating that the Rebbe rejected it altogether.⁵² A brief and uncharacteristic first-person comment is appended: "more of what we said I do not recall."⁵³ Perhaps the Rebbe rejected this entry because his prepared remarks were overshadowed by a terrible announcement that appeared that Sabbath in the Nazi propaganda organs. Chaim Kaplan provides the context, which must have occupied the minds of all Warsaw Jewry, including those who gathered on that Sabbath afternoon to hear the Rebbe's guidance:

Every Jewish man from the ages of twelve to sixty and every Jewish woman from fourteen to sixty, all of them, without exception, whether merchants or artisans, workmen or clerks, and even young

⁵¹ *Derashot* I:98.

⁵² *Derashot* II:30-33. The 1960 and 2007 Hebrew printings include this entry without remarking on the deletion.

⁵³ *Derashot* II:33.

children with their mother's milk still on their lips, are required to register in the office to be established for this purpose by the *Judenrat*. After the registration is completed the work camps are to be completed—naturally in various gradations and of various types—and the workers will be deported for two years!⁵⁴

The Rebbe had chosen to speak that week on the memorable Talmudic passage (*Sanhedrin* 39b) in which God mourns the suffering of the Egyptians who drowned in the Sea of Reeds. The angels, witnessing the downfall of the hated enemies of the Jews, burst into spontaneous song, only to be silenced by the Almighty: "my creatures are drowning in the sea, yet you wish to sing songs of praise?" The sermon followed the Midrashic intent by evoking unexpected Divine sympathy for the Egyptian taskmasters. The parallel comparing the Egyptians to the Germans was implied.

It is clear that he was of two minds regarding the content of this sermon. On one hand, he marked it for deletion; on the other, he preserved it both by giving it to the copyist and later including it among the papers deposited in the *Oneg Shabbat* archive. One marginal notation on the sermon sheds light on his thinking: he added a brief qualification to the main thrust of his argument, with its exculpatory message for the Egyptians/Germans, by inserting a passage that began, "the Blessed One did not desire Egyptian awareness of God as much as Jewish awareness."⁵⁵ The Rebbe's message of sympathy for the Egyptians/Germans, however mild and modulated,

⁵⁴ Kaplan, *Scroll*, 102.

⁵⁵ *Derashot* II:32-33.

simply could not be maintained under the current historical circumstances.

The Nazi deportation order was not implemented as originally described. Forced day-labor continued, and Jews were randomly seized and sent to the nearby camp in Dyasny for hard labor and maltreatment. Some simply did not return. Even Czerniaków himself was rounded up at one point, only to be released when his identity as head of



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-134-0766-28
Foto: Knobloch, Ludwig | Mail 1941

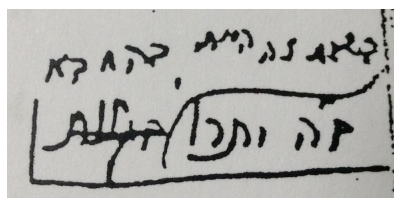
the *Judenrat* was confirmed; on another occasion he heroically presented himself as a volunteer hostage, yet was rejected for the same reason.⁵⁶ The two-year deportation plan never took place. A far more terrible deportation to the death camp Treblinka would be implemented in the summer of 1942.

On *Parashat Beshalah* (January 20), a young rebel escaped from the notorious Pawiak Prison, located not far from the

⁵⁶ Czerniaków, *Diary*, 108-112.

Piaseczno *Bet Midrash*. Andrzej Kott, the 21-year old leader of the military wing of a resistance movement called the Polish People's Independence Action, was a child of assimilated Jewish parents who had converted to Christianity. Despite his tenuous connections to the Jewish community, the Nazis immediately posted signs around the ghetto offering a 2,000 zloty award for the arrest of "the Jew Andrzej Kott." More ominously, the Nazis invoked once again their policy of collective punishment. By Thursday they had rounded up 255 Jews, searching primarily for well-known community leaders and professionals but also seizing Jews off the street in apparently random arrests. None of the hostages survived Nazi incarceration.⁵⁷

The Rebbe spent the following Sabbath (*Yitro*, January 27) in hiding. The entry for that week begins with an unusual first-person annotation. Immediately after the



traditional opening "Blessed is God. *Yitro*," the Rebbe added the phrase "in exile" (*be-galut*). He then struck out the phrase and wrote above it, "On this Sabbath I was in hiding."⁵⁸

The size and makeup of the Rebbe's audience that week remains unknown. He may have been speaking with other communal leaders who were also hiding from Nazi patrols. It is not impossible that he was completely alone, recording his thoughts for posterity. The Rebbe's message,

⁵⁷ Engelking, *Warsaw Ghetto*, 38.

⁵⁸ *Derashot* II: 32-33.

however, was one of defiance and spiritual courage. Certainly reflecting on his immediate situation, the Rebbe emphasized the value of learning Torah under difficult circumstances:

The receiving of the Torah took place in the wilderness. Perhaps this allusion is implicit in the holy work *Bet Aharon*, which mentions Rashi's comment on the verse *Hear O Israel*, "that your heart should not question the Omnipresent."⁵⁹ The holy *Bet Aharon* explains, "that you should not say, 'under these circumstances it is possible for me to serve God, but under other circumstances it is impossible for me.' Rather, under all circumstances one must serve God."⁶⁰ Consequently, had the Jewish people received the Torah in their own land, in the land of Israel, they would have thought that it is only possible to fulfill it in their own places, in their own homes, and not when they are in exile, beset by distractions.⁶¹ Therefore, God gave them the Torah in the wilderness, on the road, while traveling, in order that they might know that the Torah must be fulfilled under all circumstances.

He added emphasis by discussing the first line of that week's Torah reading, which describes how Yitro went out to the desert to meet his son-in-law Moses:

⁵⁹ Rashi on Deuteronomy 6:5.

⁶⁰ Aharon Perlov, *Bet Aharon* 33a.

⁶¹ My translation follows the 1960/2007 printed versions here, which corrects "they thought" for "they would have thought."

Why did he have to come at all? He could have remained in his home and sent a messenger to Moses our Teacher, requesting that Moses send him a Jew to educate him in Torah and convert him to Judaism, just as he himself later returned to his home to convert the members of his family. This is why Rashi says that Yitro heard about the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the war with Amalek. Amalek wanted to chill the fervor of the Jewish people—yet how could such a thing be possible after the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, which even maidservants witnessed? Amalek reasoned that while the Jewish people were traveling, then Amalek could prevail despite the Jews' lofty level of spiritual attainment, Heaven forbid. This is the meaning of the verse, *Amalek cooled you off on the way*.⁶² They relied on this. Therefore Yitro said, "if this is the case, it is not sufficient merely to receive the Torah at home. I must rather go there and receive the Torah while traveling as well, and then I can be a Jew even in my home." In other words, once he heard that after the splitting of the Sea of Reeds there was a war with Amalek, who thought that they could prevail when the Jews were traveling, Yitro realized that he must also travel to the wilderness to convert.⁶³

Returning to his opening strikeout, we can only speculate why the Rebbe chose to replace "in exile" with the phrase "in hiding." Exile, in Hebrew as in English, has a much

⁶² Deuteronomy 25:18. The Rebbe placed emphasis on the word *ba-derekh*, "on the way."

⁶³ *Derashot* II:103-105.

stronger connotation than "hiding." For Jews it has powerful associations with the millennial diaspora from the Holy Land, and was traditionally viewed as Divine punishment for human transgression. Writing in 1940, the Rebbe was certainly also aware of the strength of the Zionist movement, which viewed Jewish settlement in Poland negatively, urging Jews to return to the ancient homeland. The Rebbe's subtle alteration seems to soften all of those associations, perhaps to say that so long as he was with his Hasidim, he was not "in exile." The force of specific circumstances might have driven him into hiding, but as long as he had a purpose to fulfill by aiding and supporting his followers, he was fundamentally at home. The Kott affair forced him into hiding, but his fervor for Torah and Hasidism remained strong.

Adar I 5700 (February 10-March 10)

In early February the Nazis promulgated decrees that prohibited Jews from benefitting from general community charity services. Ration cards were distributed with racial distinctions: Jews received cards with a Star of David marked on them, while Poles and Germans received colored, otherwise unmarked cards. At this early date in the war, hunger did not stalk the ghetto as it would in subsequent years. The ration cards, however, only provided a daily average of 503 calories in the winter and spring of 1940, making the multiple charitable organizations such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the "Joint") absolutely essential (a black market economy, centered on food smuggled into the Ghetto, would become a major industry in the coming months). These charitable organizations, despite their tireless efforts, were often viewed with suspicion. Social and occupational distinctions were sometimes evident, as a

December 1941 survey of calories consumed by various classes of residents confirmed.⁶⁴

The Rebbe, who personally maintained a soup kitchen in his Yeshiva and home at 5 Dzielna street, staunchly defended the activity of the various charitable organizations in Warsaw. His comments on the Sabbath of February 24 valorize those who sacrificed themselves for the benefit of others, comparing them to Moses' defense of the Jewish people after the sin of the Golden Calf, described in that week's Torah reading:

As my father states in his holy work, one who sacrifices himself for the sake of the Jewish people is greater than one who sacrifices himself for the sake of God alone.⁶⁵ This is analogous to one who sacrifices himself for the prince, and thus demonstrates the greatness of his love for the king—such a person is not only prepared to sacrifice himself for the king, but even for the son as well.

It is possible to see from this that when Moses our Teacher saw that the Jewish people needed so much Divine Mercy to be forgiven for such a great sin, a great measure of love for the Jewish people was aroused within him such that he was willing to sacrifice himself on their behalf. Not only did he feel this love for righteous ones among the Jews, but even for those who were responsible for this great sin—all because they were children of the Holy One. Demonstrating his great love for the

⁶⁴ Engelking and Leociak, *Warsaw Ghetto*, 417.

⁶⁵ *Imrei Elimelekh* 64a-b, *Divrei Elimelekh* 88a-91a.

Holy One through his own self-sacrifice, Moses was able to awaken God's great love for the Jewish people.⁶⁶

Hard-pressed by the new Nazi restrictions on food rations, some Warsaw Jews vented their frustration with criticism of the existing social welfare infrastructure, accusing them—with some justification—of unequal treatment of aid applicants. The Rebbe's response defended the Jewish social workers, recognizing the holy nature of their often thankless labors.

Adar II 5700 (March 11-April 8)

Early March witnessed a rash of random beatings of Jews on the streets of Warsaw. Ringelblum writes of abuse that spared neither women nor child:

The Others threw a woman out of a moving streetcar. There have been cases of Jews seized off the streetcars for compulsory labor. Took women from a number of cafés (incl. The Polonia), no one knows where to; it is said that about a hundred came back a few days later, some of them infected...Noticeable increase in the number of madmen. Heard about a good-looking ten-year old boy beaten on the head who went mad...⁶⁷

The Rebbe's message built upon the Kabbalistic foundation discussed in the sermon from the week prior. After describing how "all the tribulations of the Jewish people

⁶⁶ *Derashot* I:106-107.

⁶⁷ Ringelblum, *Notes*, 20-21.

are a form of sacrifice," the Rebbe explained that the experiences and activities of Jews in this world provide energy to the angels themselves:

In the *Tikunei Zohar*, section 19, we learn that the Jewish people cause the angels to "receive from one another, whether Torah or charity," see there.⁶⁸ This not only applies when Jews give each other charity or perform acts of kindness for each other, but even when one Jew listens to the hardships of another, and does everything within his capacity to help him. His heart is broken within him and he bleeds for the other. With a broken heart he repents and prays to the Blessed One on behalf of the Jewish people. This too constitutes a form of "receiving from one another," for he receives the other's broken-heartedness and repentance, while the other receives mercy and kind deeds...the angels cry out with compassion for Jewish suffering... for has an angel ever experienced the anguish of a Jew at the moment that they beat him, or his humiliation when they chase him and curse him, or his fear, or his suffering when he has no food, Heaven forbid?⁶⁹

The theme of sympathetic suffering of the angels will be expanded considerably in the Rebbe's later sermons.

⁶⁸ "Who causes this? When a Jew receives from another, whether Torah teachings or charity (*memona*), this causes a heavenly receiving, one from another, one providing energy to another." *Tikunei Zohar* 39a.

⁶⁹ *Derashot* I:112-113.

To the Hasidim steeped in the religious significance of the ritual calendar, the Sabbath known as *Zakhor* (March 23, 1940) must have seemed a cruel redundancy. Literally called "remember," the Sabbath preceding the holiday of Purim is named for a few publicly read Torah verses that memorialize the attack of Israel's primordial enemy, the biblical nation known as Amalek:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt; how he met you on the way, and struck your stragglers, those who were weak at your end, when were tired and exhausted; and he did not fear God. Therefore it will be, when the Lord your God will give you rest from the enemies that surround you, in the land which the Lord your God gave you as inheritance to possess it, that you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you will not forget.⁷⁰

The Rebbe returned once again to the theme that pervaded much of his prewar work, arguing for a reinvigoration of Hasidic practice. Playing on the double meaning of the Hebrew verse *he met you on the way*, which can also be rendered *he cooled you on the way*, the Rebbe excoriated the weakening of religious enthusiasm among those Jews who slavishly admired the secular wisdom associated with German culture. Ringelblum noted this phenomenon a few months later, writing that there is a "tendency among some of the young people to envy the Others, who are strong, firm, proud, enjoy[ing] the good things of life. There's a tendency for some of the young people to imitate Them."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

⁷¹ Ringelblum, *Notes*, 56.

...there were some lowly people who were impressed by the secular wisdom which Amalek took pride in, and considered it attractive. This caused a "cooling off" of their regard for Torah and the wisdom of Torah, saying "the wisdom of the world is also beautiful," and "they also have noble characteristics," and "this knowledge has worldly value." Thus God introduced Amalek to you, with all his attendant worldly wisdom, and also revealed all of his wickedness, the impurity of his heart, his murderous nature, and his putrid wisdom infected you. You have already seen the reality of the essence of secular knowledge. God had already revealed the consequences of this in Spain, when Jews were drawn after their secular knowledge and philosophy, and they were then persecuted and expelled...Now you see and feel with intensity the beauty of the wisdom of Amalek...they know how to speak persuasively, but inwardly they are full of the stench of rot. When it meets their needs or even their inclinations alone, they employ the same artificial intellectual constructs, which they had previously employed to extol the virtues of morality, to now defend theft, robbery, murder, and other atrocities as praiseworthy. Such is not the case with our holy Torah and its holy wisdom.⁷²

The following Sunday, Purim, would normally have been celebrated as a holiday of great rejoicing and even frivolity, commemorating the victory of the Persian Jews over Amalek, described in the Book of Esther. The mood at the

⁷² *Derashot* I:114-115.

Piaseczno Rebbe's court, however, was somber, as described by the firsthand account of Shimon Huberband:

I went to the home of the Piaseczno Rebbe...The Rebbe sat in his *shtrayml* and his silk caftan, and spoke with a few Hasidim about the terrible situation of the Jews. There would be no festive meal and no Hasidic celebration as was the practice every year.

The mood was terrible; the predominant spirit wasn't of Purim, but of Tisha B'av. People consoled each other by saying that spring was just around the corner, and during the spring of 1940...we would surely be saved.⁷³

The Rebbe's brief message that Purim reflected his efforts to counter the mood, reinforcing the need for joy on Purim, even amidst suffering.

It is written in the holy *Tikunei Zohar* that Purim is like Yom Kippur.⁷⁴ This may mean that just as the fasting and repentance of Yom Kippur must be performed whether or not a person wishes, rather we observe this as a decree of the Holy One, so too the joy of Purim—one must become joyous, not only if a person is already in a state of joy, or even if one is in a situation where one might place one's self in a state of joy. Rather, even if one is in a lowly, broken-hearted state, mind and all spirit

⁷³ Huberband, *Kiddush Hashem*, 56.

⁷⁴ "Purim ki-yom ha-kipurim." *Tikunei Zohar* 57b.

crushed, it is decreed that one must bring, at any rate, some sparks of joy into one's heart.⁷⁵

The Rebbe's Purim comments were unusually brief, possibly truncated. On that day, Czerniaków noted in his diary, "In the afternoon, on the Jewish streets, beatings of the Jews and window-breaking. A sort of a pogrom."⁷⁶ The Rebbe's message may have been cut short by the violence in the streets.

The extreme suffering of the Jews in Warsaw provoked a resurgence of messianic enthusiasm. The upcoming Hebrew month of Nisan, in which the holiday of Passover is celebrated, was traditionally regarded as the month of redemption. Rumors circulated furiously throughout the community, claiming that one rabbi or another had revealed a kabbalistic insight into the numerical value of Biblical verses that plainly revealed the imminent arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. Shimon Huberband recorded several literary sources for the messianism of the time:

In the book *Shalshelet Ha-Kabalah* by R. Gedaliah Ibn Yahya, which has been printed in scores of editions during the last three hundred years, the following is written in the Warsaw 1899 edition on page 64, under the entry *Maimonides*: "My father and teacher in his commentary on the Book of Daniel proves that the end of days will be in the year 5700." This is the year 1939-1940 according to the general calendar.

⁷⁵ *Derashot* I:115-116.

⁷⁶ Czerniaków, *Diary*, 131.

The Otzar Yisroel encyclopedia, edited by J.D. Eisenstadt [Eisenstein], brings the following under the entry "end of days:" "The Kabbalists agree that the period in which we live is suited for the redemption of Israel. For the ten supernal spheres reach perfection every one thousand years. And if one deducts three spheres, which are the broken vessels, from the year 6000, this gives the year of redemption 5700.

Since these holy books merely state that the redemption will be in the year 5700, but do not indicate any specific date, the masses began to look for allusions to the date on which the redemption would come. The hint which emerges was that the redemption would be on the day after Passover 5700.⁷⁷

The Rebbe's comments on April 6, 1940 reflect a guarded messianic optimism. The bulk of his sermon focused on supporting the value of ritual observance, a common theme throughout *Torah from the Years of Wrath*. In closing, however, he shifted to the connection between Nisan and redemption:

"This month is surrounded [makifot] with salvation."⁷⁸ My holy father, of blessed memory, said that this is as in the phrase "the merchant extends [ha-makif] [a loan] based on his account

⁷⁷ Huberland, *Kiddush Hashem*, 122.

⁷⁸ A passage from Rabbi Elazar ha-Kalir's medieval liturgical poem read on *Parashat ha-Hodesh*,

book,"⁷⁹ God extends salvation even to those who are unworthy.⁸⁰ Since there are "seventy facets to the Torah," it is also possible to say that this word "surrounds" is used as in one who "tithes [produce] from that which is not near [*mukaf*],"⁸¹ meaning that which is not near. "This month is surrounded by salvation," salvation is very near.⁸²

The Rebbe's comments were somewhat opaque, but his message affirmed traditional messianism while grounding its implications in the here-and-now of actual ritual observance. The original redemption from Egypt is at once a memory and a promise, held out as inspiration for Jews to become worthy through adherence to the Torah. In this manner the Rebbe responded to the rumors of imminent redemption by gently tending the flames of messianism, yet cautioning his followers to not lose hold of the commandments.

Nisan 5700 (April 9-May 8)

In early April 1940, Warsaw Jews were distressed to witness the initial construction of walls in several parts of the city. Up until this point, the concentration of Jews in certain parts of Warsaw was effected by administrative decree,



⁷⁹ See Mishnah *Shevuot* 7:1.

⁸⁰ *Imrei Elimelekh* 88a.

⁸¹ See Mishnah *Terumot* 4:3.

⁸² *Derashot* I:118.

with few permanent physical structures demarcating the boundaries of the ghetto. Debates raged within the Nazi bureaucracy over the utility of a ghetto and the inconvenience it would pose on the non-Jewish population, disrupting transport and access to various institutions located in the area. Arguments over the specific boundaries of the Jewish district would continue for months, requiring periodic adjustments, but the ominous meaning of the barrier was not lost on the Jews: they were to be sealed in. Czerniaków, as head of the Judenrat, was charged with the implementation of the Nazi order. The Jews were to supply both the materials and the labor.⁸³



The Rebbe's sermon of April 13, 1940 addressed the concerns of the community in his typically Aesopian manner, drawing contemporary relevance from the ancient Torah reading and presenting it in an oblique manner that would be understood on multiple levels by his audience. He began by citing Rashi's comment regarding the

⁸³ Czerniaków, *Diary*, 138.

treatment of a physical structure placed under quarantine after it showed signs of the plague known as *tsara'at* (Leviticus 14). After seven days of quarantine, the home was to be destroyed, and according to the Midrash, the inhabitants of the home then discovered treasures previously hidden in the walls by the Emorites who lived there before the Israelite conquest of Canaan.

Let us understand: if such is the case, why is one required to seal the house for seven days at the outset, and only afterwards remove the stones? Once the plague is visible, one knows that treasures are to be found there! This is especially true according to the understanding of Nahmanides, cited in the works of my holy father, that plagues on houses and clothing are supernatural occurrences, and are only for the benefit of the Jewish people in order to reveal the hidden treasures.⁸⁴ Why then does the Torah command us to render the house impure at the onset of the seven days?⁸⁵

To restate the Rebbe's question: if the *tsara'at* is to be understood as a supernatural signal to the Jews that there are hidden treasures in the walls, what is the point of the quarantine? Shouldn't the Jews simply destroy the walls once the first indications of *tsara'at* are evident? One can

⁸⁴ Nahmanides on Leviticus 13:47, cited in *Imrei Elimelekh* 111b-112a and *Divrei Elimelekh* 138b.

⁸⁵ *Derashot* I:128-129. Note that this entry and *Parashat Ha-Hodesh* (April 6, 1940) are included out of sequence in the manuscript, written landscape-format on opposite sides of a single folio (see *Derashot* II: 88-91) In personal correspondence, Dr. Daniel Reiser and I discussed possible reasons why these two entries were singled out in such manner, but did not come to any concrete solutions.

only imagine how his question must have electrified his Hasidim, seeking guidance on the meaning of the walls under construction in Warsaw. The Rebbe's reference to the Emorite treasure alluded to a hidden benefit in the walls, but at the same time his words contained a hint of rebellion: was he advocating that the construction of walls be sabotaged? He continued:

In truth the intent of the Torah and its commandments are beyond our grasp. We can, however, perceive allusions, for we know and believe that all that God does for us—even, Heaven forbid, when God strikes us—is all for our benefit. At the present time we see, however, we are not solely smitten with physical afflictions but also, Heaven forbid, with those that distance us from the Blessed One. There is neither primary Torah school, nor *yeshiva*; neither study hall in which to pray as a congregation, nor *mikveh*, and so on. Consequently a glimmer of doubt, Heaven forbid, arises within us: is it possible that even now God's intent is for our benefit? If it is for our benefit, God should have chastised us with those things which would have drawn us closer, not with the cessation of Torah study and prayer and Heaven forbid, the fulfillment of the entire Torah!⁸⁶

Before answering his own question, the Rebbe probed further by specifically referring to the present condition of Warsaw Jewry. The punishments of the spring of 1940 seemed to serve only to distance Jews from their spiritual occupation. How could the walls possibly hold good

⁸⁶ *Derashot* I:129.

tidings for the suffering Jews of Warsaw? What did they mean, and how should Hasidim relate to their construction? The Rebbe returned to this question by digging deeper into the Talmudic teaching on the Levitical home, which noted that only a member of the priestly caste had the authority to place a home under quarantine. A non-priest, even an expert, may only render an opinion:

...a person must only say *it resembles a plague to me*,⁸⁷ and even a Torah scholar who knows that it is in fact a plague must nonetheless say "it resembles a plague," because a person is incapable of saying if it is in truth a plague or affliction. It is a matter of perception, such that one must say "it resembles a plague," whereas in truth it is an act of benevolence for the Jewish people by means of which God does good for us.⁸⁸

The Rebbe's concluding words contained several distinct messages. First, he validated the suffering of the Jews and its deleterious impact on their spiritual growth. Second, he remained steadfast in his faith that the developments were somehow beneficial in the larger plan of the Almighty. Finally, like the expert who is not a member of the priestly caste, the Rebbe could only state that "it resembles a plague:" he could not definitively pronounce that it was in fact a plague, thereby initiating the quarantine and subsequent discovery of the treasure. By analogy, he could only speculate as to the meaning of the ghetto walls—"it resembles a plague"—but at the same time he believed with perfect faith that there was an ultimate Divine purpose which would ultimately be revealed as a valuable

⁸⁷ Leviticus 14:35.

⁸⁸ *Derashot* I:129.

treasure. His response to his Hasidim, troubled by the meaning of the walls, validated their fears but urged them to strengthen their faith in Divine Providence.

The Rebbe recorded several entries over the Passover holiday, which began on a generally positive note. The construction of the walls remained a major concern, but the Ghetto was not yet closed to the outside world: the American Joint Distribution Committee ran a major campaign for Passover relief, importing thousands of pounds of flour and unleavened bread for the holiday.⁸⁹

The Rebbe spoke, as is customary, on the Sabbath prior the holiday (*Shabbat Ha-Gadol*), using the moment to provide encouragement to his followers. After discussing how God is close even to those who are unworthy—perhaps an allusion to Jews who, by force of circumstances, curtailed some of the stringencies normally associated with Passover observance—the Rebbe introduced a theme that would gradually become more prominent in his thought. He meditated on the distinction between commandments with a rational justification (*mishpatim*, translated here as "laws") and supra-rational or ritual commandments (*hukim*, translated here as "decrees"). The Rebbe described how the decrees, which he would later associate with suffering, are a major vehicle for attaining closeness to the Almighty. The entry is notable for its unusually philosophical quality, approaching an epistemological question with a curious mix of traditional essentialist thought and a strangely post-modern sensibility. The Rebbe contrasted the Jewish

⁸⁹ One short entry was struck out by the Rebbe, see *Derashot* II:52-55. It is difficult to imagine why, because the entry is relatively indistinguishable from many similar passages in the overall work: the passage expresses confidence that even though the Jews' prayers in Egypt were depressed by the harsh demands of the taskmasters, nevertheless they would be accepted by God and redemption would be forthcoming.

relationship to the supra-rational “decrees” with an oblique reference to the Nazis’ inability to understand the fundamental humanity of their victims.

The nature of human understanding is such that a person thinks he understands something through intellect alone. The truth, however, is that a person’s intellect is bound to his essential nature, and each person’s understanding is dependent upon his individual essential nature. Even the prohibitions of theft and murder, which one might always have thought to be rational commandments, in the category of “laws,” we nonetheless see now that there are nations, who by virtue of their intellectual make-up, argue that one must steal and murder. Similarly, Maimonides wrote in his *Eight Chapters* that this is why the Sages instructed us, “do not say, ‘I do not desire pork,’” referring to a commandment which is a “decree.” The Sages did not teach, do not say ‘I do not desire to steal and murder,’ for one who would say such a thing possesses a lowly soul,” see there.⁹⁰ This means that a lowly soul does in fact desire to steal and so on, even though these are rational commandments. Everyone does what is right in one’s own eyes, only a person who possesses a good soul understands that it is forbidden to steal and so on.

Therefore, when a Jew brings himself closer to the Holy One and Torah, then the Jew understands

⁹⁰ Sifra, Kedoshim 10, cited in *Shemoneh Perakim* 6.

that even the "decrees" are necessary. This is not due to human reason, because of one or another justification. Reason is only effective in understanding things that are external to a person, whereas things that are part of a person's nature are understood of themselves. They are simply self-evident, as a person is aware of himself. This is the meaning of *God's decrees and laws for the Jewish people*,⁹¹ for even the "decrees" are "laws" to them, for their essential nature is close to Torah....This is what Moses alludes to by telling them to withdraw from idolatry, in order that Divine Worship, the Torah, and the commandments not be external to them, rather they should be an expression of their essential nature.⁹²

Iyar 5700 (May 9-June 6)

The relief felt by Warsaw Jews at the beginning of Passover did not last. Decrees expelling Jews from several towns were scheduled for the intermediate days of the holiday, and pressures upon the Jews in Warsaw increased dramatically. Diarists of the Ghetto record widespread confusion among the population over new Nazi policies implemented in early May. For example, non-Jewish Poles wandering through Jewish streets were suddenly subject to seizure, a measure that was apparently connected with the demand for forced labor as the Nazis pushed their offensive on the western front. Ironically, many Poles even

⁹¹ Psalms 147:19.

⁹² *Derashot* I:119-120. A final entry for the month of Nisan (Kedoshim, May 4, 1940) was struck out. See *Derashot* II:62-63.

began to wear the Jewish armband in order to avoid the decree.⁹³

The bizarre and shifting boundaries of the Ghetto prompted Chaim Kaplan to note that “even the mystics freely admit this time that it is an insoluble riddle... Warsaw, like Noah's Ark in its day, is full of compartments and partitions that block the roads in the very places where up to now there was the most traffic. Thus for example on the corner of Nalewki and Nowolipki streets, a dividing wall has been made, and a man whose apartment is at Number 2 Nowolipki Street—a distance of only a few steps—is now forced to go around and around, via Nowolipki-Zamenhof-Gesia-Nalewki streets—a half hour's walk...in any case, beautiful Warsaw has become a jail made up of cell after cell, whose inhabitants are treated like prisoners.”⁹⁴

The Rebbe's sermons on Emor (May 11) and Behar (May 18) return to the theme of supra-rational divine “decrees” (*hukim*), introduced in Passover. As Warsaw Jewry puzzled over frightful Nazi decrees that seemed senseless, the Rebbe exhorted them to affirm the *hukim* of the Torah in response. On a literary level, it seems as if the Rebbe drew upon the mood of confusion noted in the ghetto, emanating from the irrational persecution, and urged Jews to find solace in the supra-rational nature of the Divine decrees. When Jews submit to the will of the Creator while enduring what seems self-defeating persecution, then in fact even the smallest religious effort attains great meaning:

⁹³ Engelking, *Warsaw Ghetto*, 143.

⁹⁴ Kaplan, *Scroll*, 154-155.

Consequently, when it is a *time of suffering for Jacob*,⁹⁵ Heaven forbid, we wonder what possible benefit we could derive from the experience. On the contrary, does it not diminish our study of Torah? Moreover, we are not concentrating on the performance of commandments as we once did. Since we have become completely annulled before God, however, and we see that there is no one to save us other than the Holy One who is Blessed, therefore from this self-abnegation itself we draw closer to the Blessed one, to such an extent that all of our actions, speech, and thoughts are directed to God, and become fulfilled commandments. That is to say, when we do everything which is possible for us to do.⁹⁶

On *Parashat Behar* the following week (May 18), the Rebbe developed this theme further, adding an element of hope by comparing contemporary suffering to the experience of Egypt. The Rebbe noted almost parenthetically that under current conditions, not only were the Jews incapable of saving themselves, "nor can anyone else," apparently a reference to the military successes of the Nazi war machine on the western front.⁹⁷ The entry for May 25 began with an explicit reference to the previous week's sermon, tying the Rebbe's remarks in May 1940 together thematically.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ See Jeremiah 30:7.

⁹⁶ *Derashot* I:132.

⁹⁷ *Derashot* I:133.

⁹⁸ *Derashot* I:135.

Communal concerns increased as news of German victory after victory reached the Jews of Warsaw. The ghetto population swelled with hundreds of refugees, including Jews who returned to Warsaw after having fled across the Soviet border earlier in the war, and hunger began to affect the ghetto. Nevertheless, the Rebbe's incredible faith in the salvific power of the commandments remained unshaken.

Sivan 5700 (June 7-July 6)

On June 7, Nazi "health" officials inspected the recently completed walls surrounding the Ghetto. In keeping with the euphemisms operative in the bureaucracy of oppression, the region was declared a "quarantine zone" and the Judenrat was ordered to post signs to that effect, warning non-Jews of the danger of infection. Circumscribed by the walls and diminished by grossly inadequate food rations, the economy in the Ghetto continued to worsen, just as reports of German military successes echoed throughout the community.



Shimon Huberband visited the court of Piaseczno on the holiday of Shavuot and provided a brief but evocative first-hand report. Rumors that France would fall were confirmed by the end of the two-day holiday, which celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai by communal study through the night.

I went off to the P[iaseczno] R[ebbe] to his Hasidic gathering. There was a crowd of about 150 people, but the traditional dairy meal wasn't served as it was in earlier years. The Rebbe said words of

Torah, including many words of strengthening and encouragement. Various *zmiros* were sung. When the gathering concluded, the traditional dance—with one person standing behind the other—began. During the dance the Rebbe wept profusely.⁹⁹

Huberband's comment that the Rebbe wept profusely during the traditional dance is puzzling. Were these tears of anguish, tears of joy, or something else? The Rebbe's sermon that day should provide insight, but it is unusually complex, relating to the question of how God, an infinite Being, could communicate with a finite human being. For the Rebbe, the holiday of Shavuot represented a direct and immediate transportation over this philosophical divide, an unmediated communication from God to the Jewish people. The Rebbe described this as nothing less than an intimate and mystical sharing of God's very Self. Based on the content of the sermon, it is tempting to think that the the Rebbe's tears were expressions of overwhelming gratitude at the immensity of this Divine communication. The Rebbe was ever-cognizant of the material woes of his congregation, however, so he translated his mystical emotion into an appeal on their behalf, then returned to a discussion of Psalms:

Sometimes the prosecutors overpower the Jewish people, Heaven forbid, and it is difficult for the Jewish people to be saved. Then the Holy One who is Blessed is revealed, which silences all the accusers, as in Egypt when the Almighty said *I am God*.¹⁰⁰ Consequently Shavuot, the time of the

⁹⁹ Huberband, *Kiddush Hashem*, 64. *Zmiros* are liturgical songs.

¹⁰⁰ *I am God* is spoken both while the Jews are yet in Egypt (Exodus 6:6) and also as the first of the Ten Commandments (20:2) commemorated on the holiday of Shavuot.

receiving of the Torah—and any time when Torah is studied—is a moment of salvation, and no accuser has power over the Jewish people, Heaven forbid. This is because God is speaking with us, and the essence of "I" is revealed. This is the sense of the verse, *may Your kindness comfort me as You spoke to Your servant*,¹⁰¹ not as one who speaks to one's self, rather as You said to Your servant: *When You spoke to me...for Torah is my delight*¹⁰² and You speak to me.

*A song of ascents. I will raise my eyes to the mountains, where will my help come from? My help is from God, who creates Heaven and earth.*¹⁰³ We must understand the meaning of the question, *where will my help come from?* Don't we know that God is the Savior? Furthermore, what is the relevance of the reference to the creation of heaven and earth?

It is obvious that when the Jewish people are endangered, Heaven forbid, seeing no possibility of salvation, and they ask *from where* [*me-ayin*], then the response must be *my help is from God, who creates Heaven and earth*, for God also created them from nothingness [*me-ayin*], for there was no prior basis or possibility for their creation, so too he will save us now *ex nihilo* [*me-ayin*].¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Psalms 119:76.

¹⁰² Psalms 119:76-77.

¹⁰³ Psalms 121:1-2.

¹⁰⁴ *Derashot* I:141.

Meanwhile, the fall of Paris was confirmed by the afternoon of June 14, ruining the immediate post-holiday atmosphere by casting an additional layer of gloom over the city. Shimon Huberband records an example of the black humor typical of the Ghetto circulating at that time:

Jews are now very pious. They observe all the ritual laws: they are stabbed and punched with holes like *matzahs*, and have as much bread as on Passover; they are beaten like *hoshanas*, rattled like Haman; they are green as *esrogim* and thin as *lulavim*; they fast as if it were Yom Kippur; they are burnt as if it were Hanukah, and their moods are as if it were the Ninth of Av.¹⁰⁵

News from the western front continued to worsen. With the fall of France, the Third Reich neared its high water mark, stretching from the English Channel to the Soviet Union. The Rebbe fearlessly took the opportunity to deliver a remarkably powerful, undiluted message of courage. The starting point is Caleb's call to action, exhorting the Jewish people, once a slave nation, to begin the conquest of Israel. Contradicting the fearful report of the other spies, who bemoaned that the military odds were hopeless, Caleb and Joshua remained steadfast in their faith in the Divine promise.

*Let us go up and take it over, for we certainly can.*¹⁰⁶ Let us understand: the spies certainly spoke meaningfully and reasonably, *but the nation is*

¹⁰⁵ Huberband, *Kiddush Hashem*, 113.

¹⁰⁶ Numbers 13:30.

*powerful...and the cities are fortified.*¹⁰⁷ Why did Caleb not argue with them to rebut their rationale and their arguments? Instead, he simply said, *let us go up*.

Such must be the faith of the Jew. Not only when he sees an opening and path to his salvation, that is that he reasonably believes, according to the course of natural events, that God will save him, and thereby he is strengthened; but also at the time when he does not see, Heaven forbid, any reasonable opening through the course of natural events for his salvation, he must still believe that God will save him and he is thereby strengthened in his faith and trust. On the contrary, at such a time it is better that he not engage in intellectual convolutions to find some rationale and opening through natural means, since it is clear that he will not find one—consequently it is possible that his faith will be diminished. This diminution in his faith and trust in God might serve to prevent his salvation, Heaven forbid. Rather, he must declare that it is all true, that the nation that lives there is in fact powerful, it is true that the cities are fortified. Nonetheless, I proclaim my faith in God, that God is beyond limitation and nature, that God will save us. *Let us go up and take it over*, beyond reason and beyond logic. Such faith and trust in God draws our salvation closer.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ See Zohar 3:193a.

¹⁰⁸ *Derashot* I:144-145.

The Rebbe's message is clear: Jews were not to give credence to the doomsayers of the Ghetto. Like Caleb's report to Moses on the enemy forces in Canaan, the Jews need not focus on the power of the German army, they need only proclaim *let us go up and take it over, for we certainly can*. The Third Reich, no matter how powerful, is no match for the Almighty.

Tammuz 5700 (July 7-August 4)

July brought new tribulations upon the Jewish community as the Nazis, energized by their victories on the western front, formally eliminated virtually every non-governmental organization in the General Government. Charitable agencies, cultural leagues, and of course political groups were abolished, for both Jews and Poles. The ghetto population increased by tens of thousands as Jews who were expelled from Cracow flowed into the Jewish quarter, and the Nazis enacted a new "obeisance decree" that required Jewish men to remove their hats and Jewish women to bow their heads in the presence of a German uniform, military or civil. The decree was enforced with severe beatings. Even Jewish books were targeted with wide-scale confiscations of library collections along with a ban on the printing and sale of Jewish reading material. Conscription of Jews into brutal forced labor continued and even increased. Echoing his comments of the prior month, the Rebbe validated the intensity of the suffering, yet maintained the ability of the Jew to "rise up like a lion," borrowing a verse from the Torah reading.

It is also within the power of the Jew to take strength amidst his sufferings. He does not fall, but merely lies down, and while reclining, he continues to cast down his enemies...even when he is on the

ground, he does more to his enemies than is done to him. Then he *gets up like a great lion*, even amidst great suffering he *rises like a lion*.¹⁰⁹

Av 5700 (August 5-September 3)

The month of Av passed without a recorded message from the Rebbe, for unknown reasons. This is one of several gaps in the original manuscript. It is possible that he simply chose not to produce or retain sermons from this month of Av, which includes the national month of mourning for the lost Temple. It is also worthy to note that this was the season that he would leave Warsaw for Piaseczno in prewar years. He may have given himself the month of Av to renew his strength, returning with vigor in the following month of Elul.

Elul 5700 (September 4-October 2)

During August, the impossible borders of the Ghetto were restricted still further. Rations were reduced precipitously: coupons for foodstuffs distributed by the *Judenrat* shrank from 503 calories in the spring to 331 calories, far below subsistence levels.¹¹⁰ Emmanuel Ringelblum, however, recorded a distinct change in the mood of the population at large, reflected in a renewed determination to survive, and even a surge of religious activity, perhaps related to the time of year itself: the month of Elul is traditionally associated with repentance and the hope for a sweet new year. It is tempting to correlate this with the Rebbe's

¹⁰⁹ *Derashot* I:146. See Numbers 23:21-24.

¹¹⁰ Engelking, *Warsaw Ghetto*, 417. An average adult male typically consumes between 2,000 per 2,500 calories per day. Rations would eventually drop below 200 calories in the autumn of 1941.

efforts, which called for precisely for this response. In Ringelblum's own words:

Heard during September instances of "God's people" refusing to bend...People's spirits have improved. The Jewish populace believes the war will end in two or three months because of the recent bombardments [of Berlin]. They keep repeating stories about new peace proposals offered through the mediation of the Swedes, the Pope, and so on...Recently heard that there are more than 600 prayer quorums in the courtyards.¹¹¹

It is important to bear in mind that the Jewish community, particularly the observant community, lived according to the rhythm set by the calendar of weekly Torah readings. The events of a given week's *parashah* may have shaped the thinking and mood of the Ghetto no less than the secular calendar, and in fact may even have held greater import. The reading of September 21, *Ki Tavo*, was especially significant for the inhabitants of the Jewish quarter, because it included the dreaded passage known as "The Rebuke" (*tokhehah*, Deuteronomy 28:15-67), a chilling section that describes terrible punishments that await the Jewish people should they fail to maintain faithful to the teachings of the Torah. One can only imagine how the synagogue attendees must have reflected on the similarities between the ancient Torah text and their own, contemporary experience. Kaplan, not an especially observant individual, was nevertheless sensitive to the Torah reading of the *tokhehah*: "Pious Jews who pray in secret will sense tomorrow a new meaning in the portion of the Bible known as the *tokhehah*, for all its curses seem to have been fulfilled in us. Sometimes you read a portion of

¹¹¹ Ringelblum, Notes, 46-47.

the Bible and understand it; sometimes you read it and feel it. And feeling includes comprehension. Sometimes you suspect the Nazis of reading the *tokhehah* and using it as a guide."¹¹²

The Rebbe chose to discuss the perplexing absurdity of Nazi rules in his sermon of September 21. His analysis of the nonsensical nature of the persecution—an observation that would become even more evident over the coming months—was indicative, ironically, of Divine involvement in the life of the Ghetto.

It is written in the Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 1:5, "they say to the serpent, 'what pleasure do you derive from biting? The lion tears and eats, the wolf tears and eats—you, what pleasure do you derive? [The snake responds,] 'if Heaven were to command me to bite, I would not bite.'" That is to say, all the animals kill to satisfy their own needs and thereby benefit, but this is not so with the serpent—he does not do it to satisfy his own need and benefit. This alludes to a person who acts without the intent of personal benefit; such a person has the potential of to produce tremendous good. It is only the curse that prevents this—were it not for the curse, the snake would bring precious jewels and pearls to the Jewish people.¹¹³

It seems plausible that when God punishes a person by means of a carnivorous, predatory animal, causing it to choose human flesh over animal flesh, the judgement of Heaven is cloaked

¹¹² Kaplan, *Scroll*, 197.

¹¹³ See Sanhedrin 59b.

in the laws of nature. It is the nature of every living thing to eat and to seek its sustenance. Such is not the case when a person is punished by a snake—this is a revelation of unmitigated judgement, without cloaking it in the laws of nature, for it did not seek to consume its victim, and thus had no benefit from the attack. It is judgment, pure and simple...when we see, God forbid, how they torture us and embitter us in ways from which they derive no benefit, being torture for its own sake, that this is the revelation of judgement without any masking in the guise of nature. We should realize that when we repent and pray, God will save us with a visible redemption which is beyond the laws of nature as well.

...It is within the capacity of the Jew to strengthen himself in the midst of this terrible oppression, oppression which is not cloaked in the laws of nature, replete with judgements that are beyond the laws of nature. It stands to reason that the very strengthening itself can also be transformed beyond the laws of nature.¹¹⁴

As the terrible year 5700 came to a close, the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto prepared to welcome Rosh Hashanah amidst great uncertainty. The decree banning public prayer was not lifted in advance of the high holidays, forcing Jews to worship in hiding. Even Chaim Kaplan's cynicism was overwhelmed by the piety of Warsaw Jewry on the eve of the High Holidays. His description may well describe the very circumstances of the Rebbe's own congregation:

¹¹⁴ *Derashot* I:151-152.

Secret minyanim by the hundreds throughout Warsaw organize services...There is not even a shortage of sermons. Everything is in accordance with the ancient customs of Israel. When there is no informer at work, the enemy doesn't know what is going on, and we can assume that no Jewish man, even if he is a Jew born in Poland, would inform on Jews standing before their Maker in prayer.

They pick some inside room whose windows look out onto the courtyard, and pour out their supplications before the God of Israel in whispers. This time there are no cantors and choirs, only whispered prayers. But the prayers are heartfelt; it is possible to weep in secret, too, and the gates of tears are not locked.¹¹⁵

The Rebbe delivered his final sermon of 5700 on the theme of hiding, echoing the immediate experience of his Hasidim:

*Hidden things are for the Lord our God, but the revealed things are for us and our children forever, to observe all of the words of this Torah.*¹¹⁶

Every Jew prays to God, crying out to the Blessed One, to avert all evils that might come. And when the distress, God forbid, is more severe, he cries out more, as the verse states, *and he cried a great and bitter cry.*¹¹⁷ We also pray to God without suffering from distress, for prayer is in itself a form

¹¹⁵ Kaplan, *Scroll*, 203.

¹¹⁶ Deuteronomy 29:28.

¹¹⁷ Esther 4:1.

of drawing close to God. When we pray, we do so aloud, as it is written in the holy books, "voice awakens intention, intention awakens voice."¹¹⁸ Yet what are we to do when they do not allow us to cry out nor to gather together in prayer? We are forced to pray in secret, and every Jew has to face his worries alone. One must cry over this from the depths of one's heart.

And this is the allusion in the verses, *from the depths I called to You, God. God hear my voice, let your ears attend to the sound of my supplication.*¹¹⁹ On a simple level, it is difficult to understand why the the verse repeats *hear my voice* and *let your ears [attend]*. Since God is incorporeal, and physical description does not apply to Him, therefore "ears" is an irrelevancy. The entire intent is for supernal spirituality, and the Psalmist uses physical images. When someone speaks to a person very quietly, he must stand and turn his ear in order to hear him. This is the reason we pray, *from the depths I called You, God*. From the depths of one's heart alone, and not with a loud voice. *God, hear my voice, let Your ears attend*—listen, please, to my voice, for it is necessary for your ears, as it were, to attend; please see how they do not allow me to pray, and I am forced to pray in secret whispers. Because of the suffering I endure—from this alone save me.

¹¹⁸ Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim 61:4.

¹¹⁹ Psalms 130:1-2.

The phrase *hidden things are for our God* implies a double meaning. When we must hide ourselves in things which are the provenance of our God, meaning Torah study and prayer, which go to God, this activity is predicated on the following statement, and *the revealed things [are for us and our children] forever*, with emphasis on *for us and our children*.¹²⁰ Based upon the emphasis on *and our children* we accept upon ourselves forever that God will help us and save us, and our worship, and that of our children, will be in the open, aloud, and heartfelt.¹²¹

The Rebbe began his sermons for the year 5700 with the metaphor of the Prince in Captivity, crying out because he sensed the nearness of his father, the King. The year came to a close with the Prince still in captivity, having suffered tremendous personal tragedy, yet steadfastly sentient of the presence of the King as he continued to succor his congregation with words of consolation, comfort, and courage. His rhetorical art, demonstrated repeatedly throughout the year, centered on a critical axiom: the Jews lived simultaneously in two distinct historical realms. On the one hand, their immediate experience was that of the physical realities of Ghetto life under Nazi occupation. At the same time, the Rebbe reminded them that they also lived in the cosmic realm of the Torah, whose yearly cycle of readings mirrored their mundane encounters—a phenomenon known to the sages as “the stories of the ancestors are a sign for the descendants” (*ma’ase avot siman le-banim*).

¹²⁰ These words receive special emphatic scribal symbols in the Torah.

¹²¹ *Derashot* I:153-154.

The Rebbe marshaled his spiritual strength and intellectual power to provide his Hasidim with encouragement and guidance. Week after week he returned to them with a new message of hope, even after the devastating loss of his son, daughter-in-law and shortly thereafter, his mother. When Nazis humiliated Jewish men and boys by forcibly shaving their beards and forelocks, the Rebbe responded with a sermon on self-image. The construction of the walls of the Ghetto promoted the Rebbe to discuss the hidden blessings in the contaminated walls of the Levitical home. When France fell to the seemingly unstoppable *Wehrmacht*, the Rebbe underscored the military courage of Caleb, whose unshakeable faith in the Almighty guided the Israelites to victory. By guiding his followers to see the parallels between their immediate suffering and the timeless wisdom of the Torah, he helped them place their personal anguish within the larger context of Jewish destiny, a pastoral technique that he employed with diligence and creativity to preserve the spiritual integrity of his embattled Hasidim.